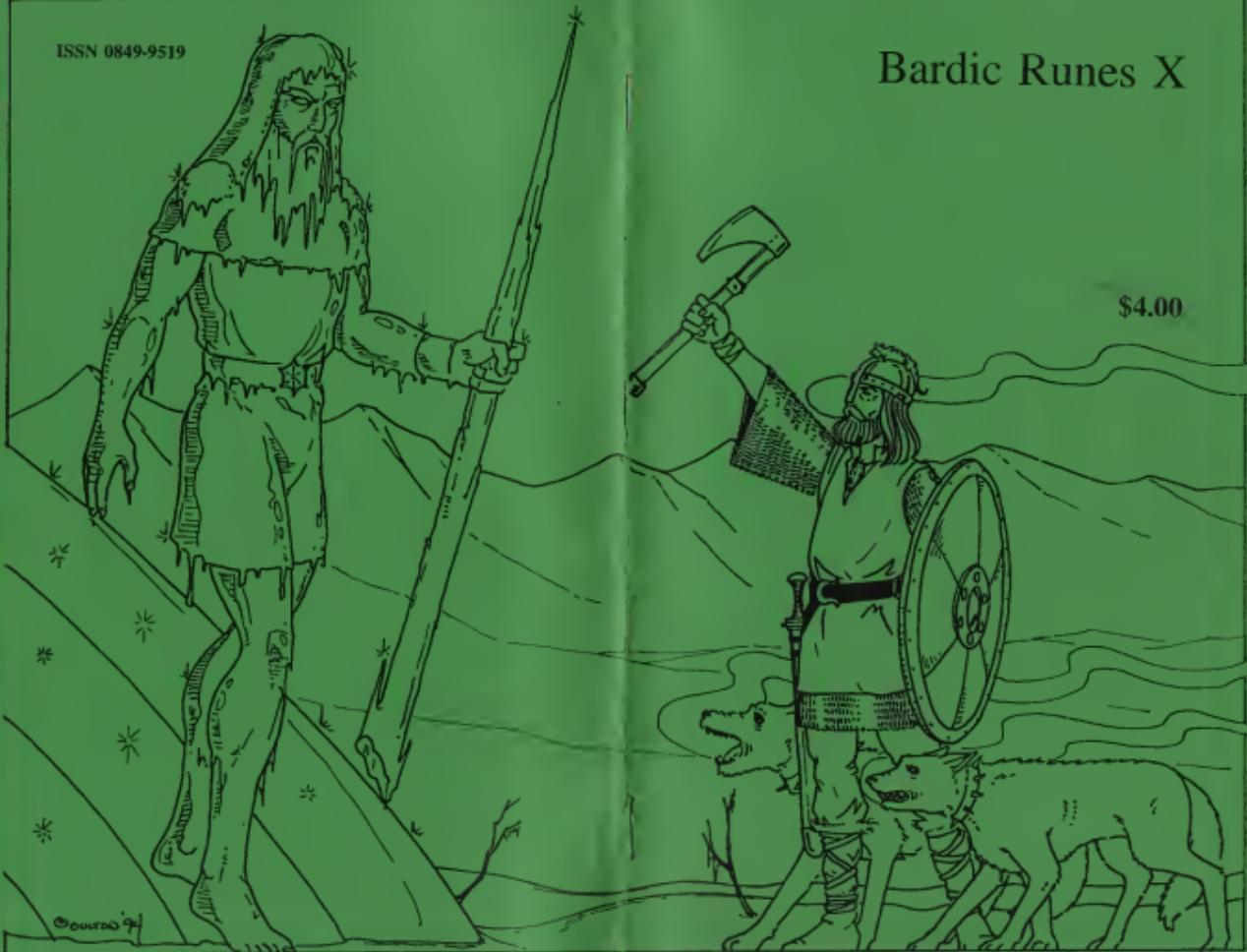


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Gratias Agimus

We are grateful to all who contributed prose and poetry of such high quality.
 Much appreciation to Owen Oulton and Mai Nguyen, who have made this issue so visually appealing.
 Many thanks to Henry McLaughlin for his proofreading.

THE LAUGHTER OF THE GODS

Thomas L. Pinkus

It was when I was much younger. It was Christmas Eve and I was traveling through England. The whole day I had spent wandering through the desolate countryside near what was Armsbrew on the southwestern coast. When evening came, weary of walking and weary of the cold soft mist which hung so oppressively around me, I stopped at a small tavern called the Fox and Quail for supper and a warm ale.

At first I thought the tavern deserted but as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim firelight I could distinguish shapes around the shadowy edges of the room. My guidebook indicated that the Fox and Quail was a tavern of doubtful reputation, and so I sat alone at the bar and made no effort to resolve those shapes into men. I ate quickly and finished my ale and rose to leave when a whitish, almost ghostlike hand laid on my arm arrested my motion and pushed me firmly, yet without effort back into my seat.

There was a man sitting on the stool next to me. How he had gotten there without attracting my attention, I did not know. I glanced tentatively at him, but though he sat in the firelight scarcely three feet from me his features were strangely indistinct.

"A bottle of Ancient Warremby," he said to the barkeep in a clear precise voice, and nodding toward me, "This man will pay."

As the barkeep went down to the deepest cellar for a bottle of that most powerful drink, I dug the money out of my wallet and said nothing. The barkeep returned and placed the oddly shaped, dusty bottle and a single glass down. He took the money and giving me no change retired to the far end of the bar and disturbed us no longer that evening.

Now Ancient Warremby is a drink which no one man in a million can drink more than a sip of without permanent damage. And as it comes packaged in a Klein bottle, well, I have heard that no more than three humans know the secret of pouring it. The man next to me picked up his glass and with a remarkably economic and impossible twisting of the wrist inserted it into the bottle. And then, without any motion as best I could see, removed the glass, filled to the brim with that glowing violet liquid. And not a drop spilled. He silently drank several glasses of that sinfully sweet drink, whose vapors alone intoxicated me, and though I watched carefully, I caught no hint as to how the trick was done.

I sat quietly as he drank, waiting, until finally he spoke again.

"The Gods," he said, "as few men realize, find most everything humorous. They are children, really, and the universe and the creatures in it are their playthings. Take, for instance, Undula. That most powerful of Deities, in order to have someone to enjoy his jokes, created a series of peoples who had ever increasing smiles, until, at last, their smiles actually encircled their heads. And when they laughed the tops of their skulls would fall off unless they remained perfectly upright. Or take Syleth. How he laughed uproariously as he repeatedly flooded the valley wherein his worshippers lived. Of course in time the last one drowned, and there was no one then to worship him. Still, it took centuries for his laughter to stop and then he took to frowning so severely that he wrinkled into himself, and compressed, and finally developed into that black hole which the scientists tell us is at the center of our galaxy.

Now the God Monash is the God of all who fly. And though he delighted in his creatures, he was also displeased with all of them, for none was perfect. Some were beautiful to look at, but flew poorly. Others flew like angels but had dull plumage. Still others flew badly and were ugly, but these, like the dodo, Monash quickly destroyed.

The greatest jeweler of all known history was Federico, who lived in his small shop on

the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. For two decades Federico worked to produce an offering for Monash and finally succeeded in creating a bird perfect in every detail. Made of the purest and most precious metals and sparkling with the most valuable of jewels, it could soar in the heavens like an eagle, or hover delicately like the frail hummingbird. Its songs were endless and each more awe inspiring than the last. And the beauty of the bird made the rest of creation seem colourless.

So pleased by the gift was Monash that he flattened the shop of Federico, with Federico in it, so that no other could ever have such a bird. And Monash retired into his heaven and spent all his waking hours with the bird. And he named the bird Avarice.

There is nothing which the Gods have which men will not try to steal. Many thieves, some quite legendary, lost their lives in pursuit of the bird. Only five made it into the heaven of Monash, and only one, the great Bertram, actually touched the bird. Ahhhh, but the perfect bird was perfect in all ways and when touched by one other than its master it screeched loudly, awakening Monash. And Bertram waited not for his judgment but leapt from the heavens and some say he falls still.

The greatest of all thieves is Elom. At birth he stole the doctor's wallet. At two, the seventeen jeweled tiara of which that famous French queen was most fond. At five, the brimstone encrusted collar worn by Charon was his. In his teens, Elom stole the blazing Firestone over which the Rajah of Monastan kept a guard numbering two thousand, the hammer of Thor from that God's side, and a chest of souls which Beelzebub himself was saving for a sunny day. Elom was born a thief, had the soul of a thief, in all ways lived for thievery, and was never, ever, caught.

And so Elom went to steal the Great Bird Avarice. He was well aware of the failure of Bertram and prepared himself fully. Firstly, he stole several inches of that magnificently strong wire which holds the moon to the earth. And then the darkened lenses worn within the eyes of Sol, that most ravishing of sprites who lives in the center of the sun. And then the earplugs of Kei-Bing, that peculiar ogre who collects the sounds of all things which fall unheard in the forests. And finally he stole a tube of that remarkable adhesive which men call super. In stealing these things Elom had many adventures which men would call great and of which the poets would sing songs, but for Elom they were nothing.

So it was that Elom went to the great ladder which led upward to the heaven of Monash. So tall was this ladder that even Colotto, who could see an ant blink on a dark night twenty score miles away, could not see the top. Many men had died of starvation, of thirst or old age in climbing that ladder, and their bodies still hung from the rungs, dangling in the evil winds which circle the world.

But Elom knew that distance has no meaning for the Gods. And so he set fire to the bottom of the ladder and then sat and watched as the ladder slowly lowered itself into the consuming blaze. For five months Elom sat, always watching, until the ladder was only six feet tall. And then Elom extinguished the blaze and climbed easily into the heaven of Monash.

The heaven of Monash was guarded by many strange and fearful things, but they were as nothing to Elom, and soon he found himself in the shadowy bedroom of Monash where the Great Bird Avarice sat upon its crystalline perch, and the God Monash dreamt whatever dreams the Gods dream.

And Elom took forth from his pocket the adhesive super and moving swiftly, but unnoticeably behind Avarice he placed just a drop of the adhesive, as the label instructed, on the wings of that Great Bird, fastening them firmly to its body so that it could not fly and thus escape him.

And Elom took forth from his pocket the short length of that strong wire and so gently so as not to be felt he tied that Great Bird's legs together to its perch.

And Elom moved then without sound to the bedside of Monash and with infinite gentleness placed the earplugs of Kei-Bing into the God's ears. And the Great Bird Avarice finding that it could not fly, sang out loudly, but the God slept unhearing.

And then Elom with unshaking hands placed the lenses of Sol into the God's eyes. And though the Great Bird Avarice could not escape from its perch, it twisted and turned its gloriously jeweled body, and even in the dim light of heaven it sparkled brilliantly. But the God slept on unseeing.

And then Elom returned to the perch of the Great Bird Avarice, and lifted the bird and its perch together, and did not stay to gloat or exult, for he was just a thief and was simply doing what he had to do and was not prideful.

But the perfect bird was perfect indeed. And who amongst all men can say that he knew of the ultimate craftsmanship of Federico? Three steps only Elom took. Three small steps, and the Great Bird Avarice began to shake, and to grow warm, and larger, and then, so suddenly that even Elom the most extraordinary of thieves could not react, the most perfect of birds lay an egg.

And the golden egg fell to the floor and burst open and out came, in full song, a tiny, exquisite copy of the Great Bird Avarice. And the bird flitted to the shoulder of the God Monash, and tapped him gently, just once, with his small beak.

The presence of Monash filled the room. Elom set the perch down, and awaited his doom.

But, as I said, the Gods find everything humorous.

'And so,' Monash said, 'The greatest of all thieves dares try to steal from me. Behold!' And here Monash created an endless supply of boxes wrapped in bright colors and tied with ribbons. 'Let Elom know that every year hence on this December day, the greatest of all thieves shall use his talents to give to each man on earth a gift.' And so ashamed and sorrowed by this judgment, which was so utterly contrary to his nature, was Elom that he would have joined Bertram in his unending fall. But Monash showed Elom a vision of the great horrors and torments which assailed Bertram and Elom knew then that all would be as Monash wished. And Monash released the Great Bird Avarice from its bondage and the two Great Birds of Monash sang and Monash laughed and laughed and still he laughs now."

Here the man's story ended, and I turned to look at him, but he was gone. And I knew then what man had sat beside me that fateful night.

There are those who tell me that the ale told me the story. And those who say it is a kindly gentleman from the north who brings the gifts on Christmas mornings. And yet others who say that there are no Gods at all. Well, there are many more truths in the heavens and the worlds of the universe than any one man can know.

But listen. For I took that half full bottle of ancient Warremby back to the Inn at which I was staying, and left it on the mantle. And the next morning, a glorious Christmas morning, there lay a leather-bound, signed, first edition of a novel by Lord Dunsany, for which I had searched for numberless years. And next to it stood that dusty bottle, completely empty.

GOOD TIDING

D. Sandy Nielsen

"Devils! Devils that rode on the backs of great water snakes!" He sank to his knees and drank great draughts of air in an effort to blurt out the rest of his tale. His body was streaked with stains of dark red as rivulets of sweat continued to stream down his quaking body. "I! I!" he sobbed, trying to finish his plaint to no avail. "You must!" he gasped, "You must!"

"No, you must," firmly she told him, then in a gentler tone added, "calm yourself. Calm yourself." She lowered a withered hand to him. "Come. Come inside. Drink. Catch your breath." He took the proffered hand and followed her into the smoky dwelling.

He drank deeply from the bark container and when another refill of the spring water was offered, he gulped it quickly down. "Thank you Wise Mother," the warrior said regaining his breath.

"My ears are not as good as they used to be and I cannot hear the sounds of things as I once did." She pointed a crooked knuckle out the open entrance way to where he had come panting upon her. "What few words I understood that you blurted out made no sense at all."

"Of course. I was exhausted. I was excited." He paused. "I was afraid." The warrior hung his head in shame. "No, that is wrong. I was terrified."

"I pass no judgement on you, White Bear. You are Chief of the Fifth Tribe under my matriarchal hand and have always done well in the ways of the people," Wise Mother soothed him, "and after I hear your tale I will still pass no discernments upon you. Now tell me how I, a tired and old, far too old, woman must save you."

White Bear looked around the typical shelter his people used, a framework of branches covered by the bark of birch trees. Tears continued to seep from his eyes and he was not sure whether it was sweat from his long run, or from fear, or simply caused by the smoky fire that vented poorly through a hole in the roof. "What I said about them is true, you see."

"No, you see. My age is long and you must start from the very beginning so that I can understand," she directed sternly.

White Bear gathered his wits and launched into his discourse. "It was the morning of a week past. The dawn was grand and the day looked to follow it so. We took to our canoes, as always to catch the calm winds of the nascent day and while the sea was still in peaceful slumber. We paddled out to our normal grounds on the shoals well within easy sight of land. A few of the larger canoes dropped nets between them and paddled them along. The young men had to try their hand, as always, at spearing the fish with their novice harpoons, while the small children dropped baited hooks over the side. There would be more than enough fish for the day with an abundance for drying in the sun. The fish were plentiful and we gave our thanks to the gods of wind and wave for smiling so graciously upon us, their chosen people. Shortly after we began to doubt their favour.

"Gull Sight was the first to spot the giant serpents against the shimmering of the rising sun. Initially he merely thought them to be the whale gods blowing their spumes off in the distance, but as the sun rose and the gigantic worms drew nearer he could easily tell he was mistaken. Paddling quickly over to where I was teaching my youngest how to jig a fish he pointed them out to me. That was when I first beheld them.

"As I said these were serpents of the sea and they were as big as whales, but unlike whales they did not swim in the water but upon it and this they did by means of a large single wing on their backs. I suppose the snakes were too heavy for their own wings for never once did they take to the air. One must count these small blessings, if graces they be, for if they had

managed to take flight through the air we would never have escaped.

"I whistled loud and shrill to our group and made the sign to paddle quickly to shore. There was no hesitation of course and soon all were paddling furiously to shore, not that any had spotted the serpents, but as we are all well versed in racing for the shore when a sudden squall may descend upon us. For that matter I don't think anyone saw the serpents skimming across the waters towards us as they had their backs to them and the snakes were still obscured by the reflections of the rising sun, but I watched carefully over my shoulder and I could see Gull Sight doing the same. How I wished I had his eyes at times. We would easily reach shore before they neared us, yet they managed to shorten the distance between us easily, giving me a good look at them. Oh what hideous demons they were. There were a number of the demons chasing us to shore and they all had their one great wing flapping hard in the air above them. They were long and sleek and each seemed to have different colour to wing and body. But the head, the head was the most monstrous of all with blazing eyes and curled lips that snarled at us, their fangs dripping blood into the water before them.

"We landed and under my direction carried our canoes well up shore. Thinking we were now safe from the serpents of the waters I allowed our people to sit and gather back their air, and I turned back to observe our pursuing adversary. To my shock they were still racing towards the shore. Were they blind? Were they going to take to the air after all? Yet they then folded their wings to their backs and my fears were abated. Without a wing they could surely not fly. Still they continued to race to the strand. Did these snakes possess legs under their bellies to walk upon the land? They beached themselves upon the sands like the great whales have been known to do.

"Then devils began to jump from the backs of the beached serpents who had stilled upon the sands. The devils were even more horrid than their snakes to set eyes upon. They must have been the dead bodies of all the fishermen that had been lost at sea gathered together by the malevolent sea snakes. They were all white and bloated from being in the waters for so long. Masses of seaweed, white, red, and dun, covered their heads and faces, yet many had had the tops of their skulls eaten clean of flesh by the fishes and those reflected in the sun. Their throats were caked with salt for they shouted low and deep, their words now incomprehensible to us. They advanced towards us, coming to exact their vengeance upon us for not recovering their cadavers from the depths. They held large coloured shells before them in one hand and in the other they carried long bones which glinted in the light of dry air.

"What could we do? We bolted deep inland to the village. We had to get all the women and children to safety.

"Still, we are the chosen. We are the people. We are the children of the great whale god. We are the ones he took to first set upon the land and call it our own. He bestows his favours upon us by keeping the banks filled with multitudes of fish. We are the Beothuk. And you Wise Mother have taught us that we must defend what is rightfully ours and how to wage combat upon all who might take it from us.

"We warriors ate and rested to replenish our strength. The women then bathed our naked bodies clean and once dry, applied a liberal coat of red ochre to our skins. With barbs sharpened we took our weapons and went to confront our adversaries on the beach .

"The sea devils had taken the wings from the still lifeless serpents and made tents from them much like our own bark tents. They had even made fire, and many of the fiends were huddled around it. It is probably the first time they were able to get warm since they drowned, but why dead men would wish to be warm I know not. They saw us coming and they turned to glare at us and we were close enough to see that their cold eyes were as blue as the bergs that

float past our coast in the spring.

"As they were once dead comrades we shouted at them to leave us in peace and go back to the depths of the sea where they now belonged, but they only stared at us with those ice blue eyes. We shook our harpoons above our heads to let them know our intent and several of the warriors waved the sacred sound makers on sticks through the air to scare them away and let them know we were still the favoured of the great whale god. Still they did not move.

"It was time to take action. Rock Arm, our finest harpooner ran forward and bringing his arm well back he let the spear fly high and far through the air into their midst. The barb hit one of them in the chest and he dropped down dead. Though I still do not understand how dead men may die.

"This just served to enrage the fiends. We quickly discovered that the large serpent on the beach had died to give birth to a thousand tiny serpents. The devils held these small serpents in their hands and they let them fly through the air at us. Many of these small straight serpents buried their heads in our flesh only to leave their tail feathers sticking out back. It was lucky that they were still too small to have a venom to them, but Seal Eyes died from the wound hitting him directly in the neck. As many of us had been bitten by the feathered snakes we retreated hurriedly once more. I ran directly here realizing our doom was upon us without your guidance and help."

"Skraelings!" Brand swore the word out under his breath. "Truly they are wretched ones."

"I'm saddened about Armlaug," Ketil said as he struck flint to stone to set light to the dry grasses under his fallen comrade's pyre. "He was a good man and a fine sailor." The flame took and soon the dry kindling was blazing hot and fierce.

Orm stood back from the heat of the pyre as Armlaug's corpse began to sizzle, the smell of burning flesh always making him want to vomit. "He was a fine warrior who died in battle on these ultimate west shores. Now he is riding with the Valkyries to the All-Father's Valhall."

Brand squinted sourly as the offshore wind blew grimy smoke into his eyes. "Armlaug will not go unavenged from that lucky shot."

"Lucky?" Ketil said incredulously. "I've never seen a spear fly so true and straight."

"I'll tell you one thing," Orm put forth his opinion, "those Skraelings are far braver than myself. I certainly wouldn't put to sea in the craft they were in. Boats made from birch bark? Absolutely not. And what was the idea of having bow boards in the centre of the boats? It makes them look like two short boats tied together, or like two crescent moons laid down side by side."

"It matters not," Brand said grimly, "we shall obliterate their presence from this new found land of ours. This will be our first staging post for conquering this new world where I will reign as the Jarl's Jarl. From here we will move down to Markland, then on to Vinland and further south on this vast land the tales of Liefer Eirikersson have spoke of. A land where the followers of Troth can worship the Aesir and Vanir openly."

The smoke from Armlaug's pyre continued to billow into the sky as Ketil supported his Jarl's ambitions. "Thousands upon thousands will follow who are forced to worship in secret, especially with the promise of free and fertile lands. They are tired of living under the yoke of Christianity that Harald Hardass and Old Gorm have brought to the land and forced down the throats of the Norse. Even that wild man of the Red Beard, Eiriker, has had to submit. Did you not see how his wife Thjodhild has forced him to build a chapel to the White Christ near Brattahlid."

Orm stood close to the other two, sharpening his dagger. "This new colony will be for

followers of the true way, the Troth. Settlers will flock from all our homelands as well as from the Danelaw, the Westmanlands, Normandie, and even as far as from the Rus. Riches from Miklegaard will help to fund many of the expeditions."

Brand stroked his flaming red beard contemplatively, then barked out a sudden laugh. "I think we have nothing to fear of these natives."

"How so?" queried Orm, wondering about the underlying currents of his leader's thoughts.

"We all know how the northern clime breeds the strongest of men and warriors from our own lands."

"Yah," the other two said in near unison, swelling with pride.

"So if this is the best in the way of warriors this land has to offer, further south the rest of the Skraelings will be as soft as jellyfish. We shall leave the mark of my Rune upon all this land."

The three men broke out in peals of laughter that the rest of the crews picked up on and followed suit without understanding why they were laughing.

"Did you see how they paddled like maddened otters at the sight of our drakkars," Orm spoke between his cackles.

"They'd never seen a dragon headed longship before," Ketil replied still howling with mirth at remembrance.

"And then they tried to scare us by painting themselves with red ochre. As if we're supposed to be afraid of mud."

"Then they shook their bone tipped spears at us."

"They have no knowledge of iron."

"And what in the name of Thor's red furred balls were those bags they waved above their heads?"

"They looked like the cut and cured blowholes of whales."

"Well they sounded like horses farting."

The corpse of Arnlaug had burnt to a charcoal blackened husk. His spirit watched from the Vault of Asgaard, first of the Nine Worlds.

"White Bear! White Bear!" Wise Mother shook his arm to break his spell. "Answer me. You said Rock Arm killed one of them."

"Yes, but how can you kill the dead."

"Not dead. Not devils," she replied, her toothless gums having difficulty with some of the words. "Men."

"No, they are devils."

"Not devils. Men."

"You were not there. You did not see how..."

"Hush!" she commanded. "I did not have to be there. You are too young to remember when I had to drive the Micmac back from taking our lands. They dressed and acted different too, but they were men. As were the Innuit, and the Dorset before them. And all men must know fear."

White Bear nodded dumbly before her admonishments.

"Now we must go to the village and then to the strand. I'm afraid my old bones won't take me there as quick as they used to, so you will have to carry me much of the journey. Do not worry. I am light. There is not much flesh left on these ancient bones."

"Here they come again." Orm pointed inland.

The Beothuk warriors had freshly painted their bodies with red ochre. Harpoons held upright at their sides, they marched in a line towards the strand and stopped short of arrow range. The Norse seafarers donned their iron helmets and gripped their weapons, be it battle-ax, sword, halberd, or hammer, and formed their own wall. They stood facing one another for an indeterminate period of time. Silent. Unspeaking. Unmoving. They merely glared into each other's eyes with unbridled hatred and disgust while waiting for the fracas to begin.

A gap appeared between the shoulder to shoulder Beothuks and a small figure appeared between them and began moving towards the Norse, the gap closing behind her.

Brand stepped forward, better to observe this strange dwarven figure that hobbled towards them, having to use a cane made from the tusk of a narwhal to stand upright. Her toothless face looked like a dried apple and had the texture of well aged hide. She could barely stand and yet she continued to totter down the White Sands toward them. Toward Brand. She stopped directly before him, her bones creaked as she looked up high into his face.

"You must be the leader of these devils, though you don't look much like a devil to me. You look like a man," Wise Mother told Brand, the words being incomprehensible to him. "True, you do not look like any man I've ever seen before in my long life, with your pale features and hairy faces, but a man nonetheless. And I know what to do with men who believe themselves to be warriors. Fearless."

Brand looked over his shoulder to the men and sniggered, then turning back asked. "Who are you ancient crone? Can you not see there is a battle to be waged here?"

"I do not know your words, but they sound like the words of a man trying to scare an old woman." She poked him in the stomach with a bony finger, causing Brand to jump back a step. "Yes, you even feel like a man."

"Listen." Brand waved an admonishing finger at her, "I don't know who you are, or what you want, but these White Sands are about to run red with the blood of your menfolk and I am not about to partake in slaughtering old women who stand in my way." She must be crazy.

"What's wrong? Afraid of a little old woman? I haven't got any weapons. I don't even have any teeth to bite you with and my nails are too brittle to scratch you with."

Brand stood back, arms akimbo, fists on hips. He looked to the Beothuk who still stood stoic, unmoving. He could hear the questioning murmur of his men behind him. He could not strike down this frail woman, it was not the warrior's way. Suddenly he felt his manhood clutched with surprising strength by the old woman's hand. He stood transfixed.

"Just as I thought," she said flexing her fingers back and forth. "No balls."

Brand was mortified. He couldn't move yet he could feel an overwhelming anxiety building inside of him. Who was this dried husk of a person? If he killed her he would never make it to the Valhall, and even if he did make it to the Fallen's Hall, he would be taunted by all the other warriors by having an old woman best him. Odin would banish him to Loki's spawn's dark domain of Niflheim, where he would be ruled over by her icy Queen, Hel. This is not the way things are meant to be. This is not how things are supposed to be happening. They are supposed to be having an honourable battle against men, not shrivelled grandmothers. Who would follow a killer of grandmothers to a new land? And what would happen if he happened to be killed by one of those deadly harpoons flying through the air? One had already killed Armlaug. Perhaps he, Brand himself, would die here on this unknown land. Would Odin's Valkyries find him here? Did Odin even reign here? Perhaps he would die and be carried off to some foreign hell by the local gods that ruled these folks, a hell worse than Niflheim could ever be.

Wise Mother rapped him against the shin with the ivory narwhal tusk she used as a

walking stick. "Bah, you are a coward just like all the other men I have met." She moved on behind his paralysed form.

Who was this incredibly ancient female, Brand thought.

Wait, what if she is one of the Norn sisters who weave the webs of destiny for all men and gods the world over. It must be Urd of Fate, the oldest of the trio. Was she sealing his fate now, getting ready to rip apart the webs of his life. She was behind him now, talking to his men, but still he could not turn to see what she was doing. He could only face the Beothuk warriors who remained expressionless to her actions.

"And what are you doing here?" Wise Woman rapped Orm's thigh with her cane.

Orm was as paralysed from fright as his illustrious leader had been. What was he, a mere soldier, supposed to do if his great leader had done nothing. He had only come here because of his love for Brand and the powerful voice and presence he carried to his men. Truth be known, he hated being under the sail with a passion. He was a warrior of the land against men he could get a solid footing against. The waves of the great Northern Ocean scared him witless. Still he would have to travel back, and then forth once more, just to lead the rest of the people here to these distant shores. Twice more on those terrifying swells, at the very least. It was too much too comprehend. And he certainly couldn't stay here by himself to wait for the others' return, he would have to make the trips. But what if they didn't make it?

Wise Woman moved on to Ketil and rapped him hard once against the knee cap. Ketil's face flinched but he never moved a muscle. "Wouldn't you rather be home?" she said to him in the gibberish they used as a language, but he didn't even hear the nonsense words, his thoughts were elsewhere.

He was still a young man and in love with the most beautiful girl in the world. She had often said to him, "Ketil dear, I'll marry you in an instant, but I can never move from the stead of my clan. My mother is very old and I can't leave her. She'd be lost without me." He loved this girl with all his heart, never more than right now, so how could he have left her. Ketil wished with all his strength that he was back with her now taking charge of her family's farm and raising a strong brood to follow in their wake.

Wise Woman moved from Norseman to Norseman, speaking to each of them, and giving them all a hard rap on some part of their body with her ivory cane. And after she had spoken to each and every crew member from each and every ship, she walked back towards the Beothuk warriors, a gap opened in their ranks and she disappeared behind them as it closed once more. After an hour or so had passed the Beothuks simply turned and walked away.

Brand was the first to break his long spell and turned towards his men. Every muscle cramped in his body as he moved, his throat was parched dry and he desperately had to relieve bowels and bladder, but that would wait. He tried to speak, but his tongue was so swollen he had to swallow several times before he could rasp out a paltry, "Men! Orm! Ketil!"

Orm snapped out of it and pain crossed his face as pins and needles surged through his frame. Ketil followed suit and between the three of them they soon had shaken all the men to usefulness once more. The crews gathered around Brand to hear his words.

"Our foe has fled before us once more," Brand said lamely. "They are soft and the land is soft, too soft for hardened men such as we. What say we return home and look for lands to plunder and settle amongst known coasts."

The cheer that was heard from all the men carried far out to sea.

"Let's get back to Greenland."

"Then quickly on to Iceland."

"And the Orkneys and Shetlands, till finally were at our true homelands."

"The further from here the better."

The men sprinted back to their ships as gleefully as their cramped legs would allow. And though it was low tide now, they wasted no time dragging their ships along the wet sand to the open waters. Not one looked back to the coastline as they sailed out of sight.

Another of the Beothuks came before her as she sat outside her simple summer shelter. It was a woman this time who made benedictions to her power and made a small offering. Wise Woman did not see the gift or hear the words, her musings were focused on past and future at once.

True they revered her now as they had in times forgotten by this generation, back when she had turned back the tide of Micmac invaders, and Naskapi, and Inuit, from their island home. Soon again she would just be the crazy old woman who lived in the interior. Such was the way of things.

These latest warriors to come to their homeland were a strange lot indeed. Men the likes of these she had never seen or imagined before. Where could they have possibly come from? Nevertheless they were men, and as such each had his own particular fears and weaknesses. Fears that she knew the shamanistic rites could speak to regardless of language. Yet she still had to talk to each and every man to build his fears, before she had just talked to the group as a whole to find their inner terrors.

She would die soon. No matter how old she was, life was not forever and none of the younger women in many generations had come to apprentice under her as she had under her own mistress. This power would depart from the Beothuks forever with her passing.

She'd managed to turn back the tide of this latest wave of strange invaders and that was a good tiding. But this would be the last good tiding.

One cannot hold back the tide forever.

--DSN

DAUGHTER OF THE WIND Peggy Hamilton

Sunmist brushed a wisp of honey-gold hair back out of her amber-gold eyes without breaking the rhythm of her pen on the parchment. She sat at a large table in a room lined with books, translating a tale written in Late Old Logren. She did not expect anyone to read it; barely two dozen people in all of Mist Valley could sign their own names, but she loved rare and ancient manuscripts the way her grandmother had loved rare and exotic plants. She laid a finished page aside and leaned back for a moment. Her head ached with the pressure of the storm moving in over the western mountains. It would arrive that evening, wet and fierce, but not violent enough to cause serious damage, and she would see that the temperature stayed above freezing to protect the tender buds of early spring.

Sunmist rose and walked to the north-facing window, looking out into the boughs of the great oaks that gave Witch Oaks half of its name. The house had been built for the first Baron Touchstorm's eccentric sister, Mist, and was tucked into a fold of the hills well away from the village of Storm. The rest of the Touchstorms had died out long ago, but Witch Oaks had passed from mother to daughter for nine generations. Sunmist had lived there all of her twenty-five years, the last three, since her grandmother's death, very much alone. The sunlight slanting through the trees told her it was nearly noon. She returned to the table to reluctantly re-cap the

ink and clean the pens. She loved her books, and if she allowed herself she would spend all day in the library and never get anything else done.

Two hours later Sunmist was on her knees in the garden, trying to care for her grandmother's plants, though she had never been any good at growing things. She had just removed the insulating straw from the only sinyan bush to survive three years of her care when she heard a horse approaching, and knew by the sound that it was not one of the local farm horses. She stopped to listen. No one came to Witch Oaks. Tradition maintained that the valley's prosperity depended on there being a Touchstorm at Witch Oaks, but they were more than a little afraid of her all the same. Little wonder really that she had grown up to love books. She stood up, wiping the dirt from her hands on a cloth tucked into her belt. Sunmist knew everyone who lived in Mist Valley, but she did not know the man approaching her door, or the chestnut mare he rode. He was of average height and build, with brown hair and eyes, and an air of authority. He had a sword, but no armor, and as he drew closer she saw that he wore the badge of the King's Scouts on the shoulder of his tunic.

He brought his horse to a stop and bowed from the waist while still in the saddle, "Lady Touchstorm."

It took her a moment to realize he was speaking to her. "Sunmist," she corrected.

"Lady Sunmist. They told me about you in the village. They say you're a wizard."

"I'm a weather witch," she admitted with a sigh. Every year or so she had to explain to some stranger that she did not make philtres or good luck charms. "I don't do love potions."

"I don't want a love potion," he said, dismounting. "Akepa's invading."

"Unlikely," she observed. "It's too early. The rains haven't stopped yet. And even if they were, what would that have to do with me?"

"I have seen them myself," he said, coming forward to stand within a yard of her. "They are coming."

"Do you have a name?"

He started at the abrupt change of subject. "Captain Taidje Redwing, of the King's Scouts."

"Well, Captain Taidje Redwing, of the King's Scouts, what has Akepa's army to do with me?"

"I need to delay them until our army arrives, and I have only seven Scouts with me. I need your help."

She regarded him silently.

"You live in this valley. Won't you help defend it?" His eyes flashed with irritation.

"Captain, this valley has changed hands six times in the last hundred and fifty years. Both kings collect taxes. Neither does anything in return. Why should I care who claims this valley?"

He took a square package out of his saddlebag and began unwrapping it. "In that case, my lady, perhaps I can buy your loyalty." He handed her the contents, a slender, leather-bound volume of obvious age. She opened the cover.

It was written in the oldest of Old Logren scripts, and he knew it would take her weeks to decipher it, if she could make sense of it at all. He had bought it from an old drunk in the tattered remnants of a scholar's robe for a bottle of cheap wine, and in the three years he had owned it he had been unable to translate more than a dozen words. But it was clear that she recognized, as he had, the sigil of Danton, the last of the Mage-Emperors, dead almost a thousand years.

"Just what do you expect me to do?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You're the mage."

"I am not a mage. I am a weather witch."

"What's the difference?"

"Magecraft is something you can learn, like any other craft if you have the talent for it, a thing of spells and rituals. Weather witching is something you are. I can't explain my affinity for the weather, or how I do what I do. It's just a part of what I am, as it was part of my grandmother, and her mother. I hadn't the strength nor the skill to work the weather until I was nearly thirteen, but there had never been a time when I didn't feel it."

He looked at her with a new respect, and a touch of fear. The mages he had met who came into their power so young were indeed forces to be dealt with. But he tried not to let the fear show on his face. Judging by the comments in the village she had enough people afraid of her already.

"I don't know how I can help," she said. "The most I can do is make it rain on them."

"If it rains enough--" he smiled. "Armies don't march well hip deep in mud." He watched her reverently stroking the cracked leather binding and knew he had her.

"My loyalty is not for sale, Captain," she raised her amber eyes to meet his, "but my services are. I'm not sure what I can do, but in exchange for this I will aid you to the best of my ability for no more than two weeks," she glanced up at the oaks around them, "and travel no further than the hills at the south end of the valley."

"Agreed."

Redwing spent that night in her grandmother's room, while Sunmist sat alone in the library, turning the storm south into the hills at the end of the valley, and stalling it so the roads would be too wet for the large horses and heavy supply wagons of the Akepan army. They left for the southern hills at dawn.

Redwing had been prepared to wet-nurse a reclusive scholar and was surprised to find she rode as well as he did, a spirited gray stallion named Mistwalker. The first day she rode in silence, and he began to think her cold and arrogant, until he realized she was dozing in the saddle. The next day he made an effort to break through the reserve natural to a woman who spent most of her time with books, and found her pleasant company. She listened to his tales of the cold lands to the north, and talked about her library and translations, and how difficult it was to get books when she had to depend on travelling traders.

They reached the southern hills at dusk on the second day, and spent the first half of the night negotiating trails too narrow and overgrown to admit more than one horse at a time. It was well past midnight when they slipped into the Scouts' camp, hidden in the mesquite-covered slopes overlooking the Akepan army. Sunmist was surprised to find that three of the seven scouts waiting for them were women. She knew there were women warriors, but she had understood them to be rare, and wished she dared ask them about it.

For the next week the Akepan army suffered the worst weather imaginable. Biting cold winds blew down tents and knifed through the heaviest cloaks. Stinging rain, driven by the wind, soaked everything, sinking wagons axle deep in mud, and spoiling fodder and other foodstuffs. Lightning scattered horses and other livestock. The Scouts slipped into the camp every night to make the most of her efforts by loosening tent stakes, fraying ropes, and untying the covers protecting equipment and supplies. With the Scouts' help small personal items began disappearing from the belongings of one mercenary company, only to be found in the camp of another, and when wind and rain did no damage there was fog so thick they could not see across their campfires. It was always bitterly cold.

At the end of the week Sunmist stood on the hillside in the deepening dusk, looking down into the fog-shrouded valley where the enemy camped. For the last two days she had relied on fog and wind and cold to make them miserable, but the storm now moving in over the western mountains would give her the weapon she needed to finally send them packing, or so she hoped. She was eager to return to the comfort of Witch Oaks, but oddly reluctant to leave Redwing and his Scouts. She had never worked with anyone before, except occasionally her grandmother, and that had been nothing like this. She was surprised to find herself enjoying it. Down in the fog below her she knew the Scouts would once more be slipping into the enemy camp, and she knew that without them her efforts would not have been nearly as effective.

The brush rustled as Redwing stepped up beside her. "They should be in place by now."

Sunmist nodded, and reached out to the storm, immersing herself in the air currents and energy streams, and pulled it toward the camped army. The rising wind blew the fog away, replacing it with a driving rain. She felt the energy building in the clouds, and channelled the lightning to the places the Scouts had suggested, sending livestock scattering in panic. Handling lightning was exhausting, exacting, exhilarating work. As intoxicating as winter wine, and she placed bolt after bolt, until she felt herself growing dizzy and cold. She had begun to withdraw from the storm, knowing she had spent more of her own energy than was wise, when she felt energy building in the clouds over the tree where Kai, Redwing's lieutenant, waited for the returning Scouts. She grasped the bolt and twisted it aside, but it was more powerful than she had expected, and channelling all that energy took the last of her strength. She felt herself falling, and Redwing's arms catching her, as she lost consciousness.

She woke to the sound of the rain beating on the tent above her, and her head pounding in rhythm with it. She opened her eyes to find Redwing sitting anxiously by her side, his face barely visible in the light of a single candle. They could not risk a fire, but she was warm and dry, wrapped in every blanket in camp. She started to sit up, but the pounding in her head, and Redwing's hand on her shoulder, restrained her.

"Lie still," he ordered. "You've been senseless most of three hours."

"I've done worse," she raised her hands to her head. "I knocked myself out for almost ten hours once, when I was thirteen." She felt suddenly awkward and foolish. "I was just learning," she explained quickly, "and didn't know my limits."

"Still don't by the look of things." He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "Have more care for yourself. Wounds I can manage, but this--" he shook his head.

"I'm not hurt, just tired. And hungry enough to enjoy one of those little white rocks you call bread."

He laughed, "That is hungry."

He fetched food for her, insisting she remain in bed for the rest of the day, and would not hear of her raising so much as a gentle breeze thereafter. It was not necessary. The more superstitious had been muttering for days that the gods were not on Akepa's side, and desertion was rampant. Two days after the storm the official retreat began, and as soon as they turned south the weather began to clear, giving further proof that the gods did not approve of the invasion.

The Scouts spread out through the hills to keep an eye on the departing army while Sunmist began breaking camp and making preparations for their own departure. Aki and Mira would be following the army until it was well south, but the rest would head back into Mist Valley, eager to get to the village of Storm and dry, sheltered beds.

Sunmist had just begun filling the waterskins from the rainwater they had collected when strong arms grabbed her roughly around the waist and pulled her back against a man's body.



"Pretty little thing," he said, his breath smelling of stale wine, "out here all alone. Need somebody to look after you." He swung her around to face two others, dressed as soldiers, deserters from the Akepan army. "But we'll take care of you," he went on, "won't we boys?"

"Sure we will," one of them said as they stared toward her, "and she can take care of us."

Sunmist tried to break free, but she had no experience in fighting, not even the normal scuffles of childhood. They laughed at her struggles, passing her from one to another and forcing kisses on her that tasted of sour wine and onions. The one that had first grabbed her pulled her back against him once more, running his hand over her thighs and up between her legs. She wanted to scream, but the knot of fear in her throat choked off all but a whimper. His hands tore open her shirt while the others fumbled with the opening of her trousers. She bit her lower lip until it bled, determined to endure, and survive.

"Let her go." Redwing's voice was not loud, but it held the snap of command, and their hands dropped away from her for a moment, but they were quick to grab her when she tried to run toward Redwing, who stood alone at the edge of the camp, sword drawn.

The one who had first grabbed her shoved her into the others' arms and moved toward Redwing, drawing his sword. "Come get her."

Sunmist had read about sword fights many times, but had never before seen one. As she watched them, cut, thrust, and parry became more than just words. It seemed to her that Redwing was winning, and she feared the others would intervene, but before they could Redwing tripped over an exposed root and fell. The deserter raised his sword to strike, and Sunmist reached out in desperation, gathering the energy in the air. With a flash and a thunderclap the deserter fell, unmarked except for burns wherever his skin had touched metal.

The other two fled, and Sunmist crumpled to the ground, burying her face in her arms, ashamed of her tears and unable to stop them. She was not aware of Redwing getting up and coming over to her, or of him hesitating beside her not sure she would accept his comfort. She flinched when he first touched her, but when he put his arm around her shoulders she leaned into his embrace, resting her head against his chest.

"Are you hurt?" he asked gently.

She shook her head, not trusting her voice.

He wiped the blood away from her lower lip, but did not try to stop the tears.

"I've never done that before," she said quietly.

"Killed someone? Or called lightning out of a clear sky?"

"Either one. I didn't know I could." She was silent for a long time, "I was so afraid," she said finally. "I couldn't move. I let them--"

"You kept your head," he interrupted firmly, "and saved my life." He smiled, "For which I have yet to thank you, milady."

She managed a shaky smile, "'Twas nothing milord."

He stood and helped her to her feet, "I did not find it so."

She flushed and pulled at the remnants of her shirt. "I don't want the others to see--"

He got her a replacement and sent her into the bushes to clean up while he finished breaking camp. She came out a few minutes later and stood staring at the body.

"Will you teach me?" she asked without looking up. "Teach me to fight?"

Redwing looked at her for a moment, then took the sword out of the dead man's hand and held it out to her.

She hesitated.

"It's yours," he said. "It was your kill."

She swallowed hard and took it.

The sword was a little heavy for her, but he taught her to wrap her wrists, and began teaching her the simplest, most basic movements of sword work. That evening he worked with her again while the others made camp, warning her that all he could really teach her in a few days, was how to avoid cutting her foot off, that real sword work took years of study and practice. Supper that night was a celebration of the Akepan departure, and of the first fire in almost two weeks. They sang songs and told tales Sunmist had never heard before, and promised herself she would remember to write down as soon as she was back at Witch Oaks. The evening ended with a small ceremony in which Kai presented Sunmist with a Scout's Badge, and Sunmist, much to her surprise found herself on the edge of tears.

Before they slept that night Redwing asked her to go with him to court, so the king could reward her personally, but she shook her head, "My reward is in the library at Witch Oaks."

"Your translation cannot wait a few weeks?"

"It can, but I cannot. I must go home. Witch Oaks--" she paused, searching for the right word, "resonates with the power of generations of Touchstorms. It strengthens, and it binds me. I cannot go too far, or be gone too long." She shook her head, "I cannot join you."

They left the others in Storm, but Redwing insisted on escorting Sunmist to her door. As she rode into the shadow of the great oaks she was torn between relief and despair. She loved the peace and wholeness she found nowhere but at Witch Oaks, but she could also feel the old isolation and loneliness closing about her once more.

"If you could stay--" Sunmist began.

"I must report." He hesitated, "But I will be back. We will be watching the border much more closely."

"For a time."

"I will not lose interest." He reached over to take her hand. "My lady, may I call on you when I return?"

Sunmist was startled by his sudden formality, but smiled, "Of course, Captain. You may call on me any time."

He shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. "There will be deserters and mercenaries working their way north for several weeks. Be careful."

She smiled. "I promise not to take rare manuscripts from strange men."

He flushed, but met her eyes. "I must leave, but I will be back. Be careful with yourself until I return."

She nodded.

He kissed the back of her hand, then turned his horse and rode away.

Sunmist woke the next morning, as she always did, when the sun shining through her bedroom window reached her bed. She took care of Mistwalker first, as she always did, then got her own breakfast, and only the sword leaning up against her bedroom wall, and the manuscript waiting in her library, convinced her it had not all been a dream. She forced herself to complete her usual morning chores before she allowed herself to go up to the library and begin work on the manuscript.

She laid out pens, ink, parchment, and the Late Old Logren wordbook compiled by her great-great-grandmother. First she made a copy, transferring the ancient script into modern characters, then she began to translate. When she finished the title page she began to laugh. It read:

A Treatise on and Collection of
Spells for the Control of the Weather

**AFILAE:
A LEGEND OF THE DARDENIE**

Greg Older

I

Long ago when the world was young there was a kingdom ruled by a wise king. That kingdom was called Kalimar and the king was named Kole. He ruled from his great castle Caer Faeracros and he had many great champions who ventured forth to do battle with Our Lord's enemies in the world. The greatest of these enemies were the knights who served King Geas of Malibar and his son, the Prince. Though King Geas was a black-hearted man and had no honor, it was the Prince who was the true power and he was a fiend with an evil mind and a black heart. The Prince was a terrible warrior and commanded great respect, and honorable in his own way: he would break no personal promise once made by him. But he would never keep the word of his own knights and they would be untrustworthy save for their fear of him or the fear that Kole's knights gave them.

Afilae was the daughter of King Kole's oldest ally and friend, the Baron of Eldansgen. She was brought to court and raised there after goblins had overrun her father's land. She was said to have been a tall beauty, with long golden hair that was tied with simple hemp, for no silk or gold weave was fair enough to bind it. She was sought after by many men, but her heart belonged to Sir Tristani, one of the most handsome of the knights in the land. He too loved her and wooed her. She in turn gave him her blessings and prayers when he rode off to do brave deeds and wage battle.

Her love for Sir Tristani had made her the talk of the servants but it brought her no shame. Sir Tristani approached the Lord of Eldansgen for Afilae's hand and was not disappointed, for the Baron agreed to bond his allegiance to King Kole and a marriage was to be.

II

One day before the ceremony, however, Sir Tristani rode out when bandits threatened a village and was beset by villainous knights from Malibar and taken hostage. They spirited him off to Caer Ferrofang, a fortress under the shadows of the mountains and a stronghold of the Prince. No knight could free him from that fortress, for an agreement had been forged between Kole and King Geas, and though the knights had broken oath, only the Prince could punish them and Kole would not challenge the Prince for the King suffered from terrible visions that weakened him. The knights of the court were sent to and fro throughout the land searching for the cause or the cure to these night time visitations, but that is another story.

Afilae was crushed by the tale and ran to the King in his hall to plead with Kole to force the foul Prince of Malibar to relinquish his prisoner. But no said he, "I cannot force the Prince for he has done nothing to bring my wrath against him nor will I break my word to him and order my knights to champion your beloved's cause. Other matters are on my mind and I cannot be turned aside for my kingdom is at stake. Go to the priests. Perhaps they can help you where I cannot."

Turned away, Afilae ran to the clerics to plead with them to force the foul Prince of Malibar to relinquish his prisoner. But no, said the priests, "There is devilry in the land and the world grows ill. We must turn our attention to our Lord and our flock to get through dark times. We cannot force the Prince to give up your beloved. Go to the knights. Perhaps they

can help you where we cannot."

Tumed away, Afilae ran to the knights of Kalimar to plead with them to force the foul Prince of Malibar to relinquish his prisoner. But no, said they, "for the king grows ill and we must seek a cause or a cure. The land grows weak and dark while the king is ill. We cannot storm Caer Ferrofang or fight the Prince while our Lord has need of us. The Prince will not harm Sir Tristani for he has given his word and if he does, we will see him sent to the fire."

Making up her mind, Afilae decided that something had to be done to force the Prince of Malibar to give up her beloved Sir Tristani. The king would not help her because he was afraid for himself and his realm. The priests would not help her because they were afraid for the king and his realm. The knights would not help because they were afraid for the king and his realm. The only one left to help him was Afilae herself so she at last went to the dwarf Adrexis.

The dwarf Adrexis was the master smith of Kalimar who forged the great swords, the great shields, and the great armor of the knights of Kalimar and had served the kings of Kalimar back to Kole's father's father, the great hero Earabar. Adrexis lived and worked in a great workshop under the castle that billowed steam and smoke all day and all night, where he hammered metal, forged steel, and wove mighty dwimors for the knights of Kalimar. Afilae descended down into Adrexis' chambers where he stooped at his metalwork. "Noble lady, what brings you here to my lair that I may do for you. So rare it is that one of such beauty like yourself should come here. Shall I forge a treasure for you? A ring of true silver or a bracelet of gold and rubies? Speak, and I give my word that I will do to the best of my ability to serve you as I may."

"If so, then help me free my beloved Sir Tristani. The Prince of Malibar has taken him away to Caer Ferrofang and he and I were to wed the morrow," replied Afilae.

Asked Adrexis, "Can not the King help you? What of the priests or the knights? Could they not champion your cause?"

"They would if they could, or so they say. There is much amiss and they have much to do. Only I can help my beloved, or so it seems, and I shall challenge the Prince myself. Make me a sword and armor so that I can free him."

Adrexis shook his head. "A strong blade and mail is little without skill or will behind them. Of the will I have no doubt that you possess, but the other? I will give the blade and the mail, for I have given you my word. Will you also take my advice?"

"And what is that?" said she.

He looked up from his work and spelled his forge for his new task and turned to her. "I will give you the skill to use both blade and shield so that you may face the challenges that the Prince poses for you. But I will also warn you, this path has many dangers, and fate will not be kind to you as you will be made to sacrifice much of your self on it. Will you still take this path?"

"Yes, I will take it," said she and so Adrexis forged her a sword, a shield, mail, and a lance and taught her to use them.

III

After many days of training, Adrexis told Afilae that he had done all that he could and sent for a white mare that was battle-trained. "I have given you sword, shield, mail, and lance. Be warned though, they will protect you as well as possible but there are great foes that you will meet that will break them and pierce you. You will suffer from this fate and I cannot prevent it, but your training may help you overcome pains and misfortunes ahead that you may succeed

in your undertaking."

Said Afilae before mounting. "I will take that fate then though you have given me warning and I thank you for all that you have given me. My family owes you a great service."

Adrexis bowed and watched Afilae ride forth from Caer Faeracros saying to her at last. "If I collect, it will be from the living and not from the dead."

She rode for five days and five nights until she came to a river stained black. Afilae could not cross, for the river was fast and deep and she rode along the banks of it until she came to a great stone bridge. But the bridge was guarded by a knight in shining blue armor and atop a steed also decked in mail. In his hand was a golden spear. Afilae rode to the bridge and stood there. "May I cross?" said she to the knight.

"None may cross this bridge into Malibar unless they best me," declared the knight.

"Then you serve Malibar, and I will take that challenge."

"I serve only myself and not the Prince or any king. I do accept that challenge and so let us break lance in the meadow before my bridge."

So Afilae took her lance and shield and they charged. The blue knight struck the shield and lo! Adrexis' work was fine for the golden lance shivered and turned away. They drew back to joust again and behold! The golden lance, once broken was whole again by some enchantment. They charged again and though the blue knight turned her shield and struck her hard this time, she remained astride while her lance struck him hard and knocked him to the ground. Defeated, the blue knight yielded.

"You may cross my bridge then for you have bested me," said he, kneeling before her.

"Do you have knowledge of the land beyond the river?" she asked of him.

The blue knight responded. "Yes, for this road leads to Caer Ferrofang, which is Irontooth, and the fortress of the Prince. To gain entrance you must defeat the knights of the setting sun, the scarlet knight and the purple knight, and then you must face the knights of the night, the sable knight and the knight unseen, and overcome the tests before you."

"Thank you for your counsel," she said to him and rode into Malibar.

Afilae crossed the bridge and traveled into a gnarled wood filled with brambles and thorns where the sky grew red and smoky. Torches lined the path and provided light for this hellish landscape. Then the forest broke from around her and ahead stood a warrior clad in red plate armor and wielding a blade that was of flame.

The red clad warrior approached and issued forth his challenge: "I am the Scarlet Knight of Ferrofang. Yield or perish! No lance can pierce me!"

Afilae responded, "Then try mine!" and rode forward to charge. Her horse galloped forward and she struck at him as she rode by, her lance splintered and she was thrown to the ground.

The Scarlet Knight roared with laughter. "Fool! No lance may pierce my armor!"

Afilae rose quickly to her feet and drew her sword in a flash. "Then can it turn the steel of a blade?" She struck at him and though his sword burned fiercely, it could not strike past the shield that Adrexis' forged and as the sun set and dusk began, he weakened and so was impaled by her sword.

Deeper into the forest she walked for her mare had left in flight during the battle with the Scarlet Knight. Then she came to a hill of stone over which wound the path and climbing to the top she found a second knight with purple armor, outlined by the fading light of the sun.

The knight issued his challenge. "I am the Knight of the Dusk and a champion of Ferrofang. Yield or perish for I can break any shield." His axe blade glittered with the sparkle of frost.

"Let us see if you can break mine!" shouted Afilae in challenge. And so they were locked in mortal combat until the darkness came and he weakened. During the battle, the Purple Knight smote her shield and it was broken. Then she drove her blade under his swinging arm and pierced him.

So, having defeated the knights of the Sinking Sun, she prepared to meet the Sable knight of Twilight. She climbed down the other side of the hill and walked until she saw the silhouette of Caer Ferrofang. Before the drawbridge was a knight in blackened mail who issued a challenge to her. "I am the Knight of Twilight and I can break any sword. Yield or perish!"

"Then try my blade. I doubt you will find it so easy!" and so charged him. The Sable knight brought forth a flail and struck at her sword, snapping the blade in two but her sword still struck him and unbalanced him and she struck him again with her hilt, causing him to plummet into the murky depths of the moat. She crossed the bridge and entered the barbican of the castle.

Beyond the gate, she entered the marshalling yard of the Castle where it was all dark and the moon had yet to rise. Then she heard a voice call out a challenge to her. "Sir knight! You have broken your lance when you defeated the Knight of Sunset. You have broken your shield when you defeated the Knight of Dusk. You broke your sword when you defeated the Knight of Twilight. I am the Knight of Darkness, the Knight Who Walks Unseen, and greatest of the warriors of Caer Ferrofang save the Prince himself, and I will now break you! I can pierce any armour and I cannot be slain by any weapon you can wield! I ask you now to surrender or die!"

Afilae defiantly challenged the darkness around her. "I have come for the Knight Tristani and no one shall prevent me! Turn him loose or I shall slay you also!" Her cry was in vain, for the darkness only rang with the laughter of the Knight Unseen.

She could hear steps as he approached and though fires were lit in the yard, she could see no one. A quick shimmer was to her left, and though she jumped back, a blade struck her and bit into her shield arm. Peals of laughter came forth as Afilae swung her broken sword; she hit nothing. This continued for some time: Afilae would hear the Knight Unseen's approach and defend herself as best she could, striking back only to fan empty air. Soon she was covered with cuts and worn down by the Knight Unseen's attacks and taunting.

"No man can slay me!" triumphed the Knight Unseen and attacked with a great stroke to end the battle once and for all. His blade pierced Afilae's mail and cut her left breast. But his victory was short lived for his sword became lodged in her armor and Afilae reacted quickly enough to score a wound against his thigh, drawing blood. The Knight Unseen drew back into the darkness but his blood was visible to her. She drew out his blade and slowly followed him.

"No man may slay you or so you say. Is that your pact? Then beware for I am no man but a woman and I can see your blood." With that, she swung her sword where a puddle of blood floated in the air and cleaved steel and flesh. The body of an armoured man lay before her, beheaded.

At last she entered the keep, but not before tending her wounds. The cut on her breast was deep and she could do nothing but to sear it with heat with a hot iron from one of the fires, a scar she would bear for the rest of her days. The interior of the keep, though torches were on the walls, was as dark as the yard. Then a voice echoed out from ahead. "You have defeated the five knights that I have posted and you have entered my keep. You are a good warrior, even

if you are a woman."

"Then you are the Prince. Come taste my blade!" she called out to him.

A laugh returned, but not the malicious laugh of the Knight Unseen. "Dear Lady, I have no intention of fighting you. You seek the release of Sir Tristani, one of King Kole's knights, do you now? I heard your challenge out there in the yard. If so, I can have him released and free to return to Kalimar."

"Then release him."

"I will release him under certain conditions. You are not without beauty, even though you are greatly scarred from your battles and you have a fury I have not seen in many women. I will release him if you become my wife."

"Nay, I will not do it. Sir Tristani is my beloved and my intended and I will not break my vows for you!"

"Nor would I force you to break them. Very well, I have three challenges for you. If you can break the three enchantments before you, you may have Sir Tristani and take him back to Kalimar, on my word of free passage."

"Then I agree."

"Face now the First Challenge. Before you is a courtyard. In its center is a pool. In the pool is a mirror. But whose face is in the mirror?" said the Prince from the shadows.

Afilae entered the courtyard warily and stood before the well. "This is a pool and in it is the reflection of the Moon which is like a mirror and the moon's face is in the mirror."

"Good. That is the Challenge of the Moon." And a door opened ahead with torches ablaze and she entered.

"Face now the Second challenge, the Challenge of the Stars. Your beloved lies ahead. Just walk down the hall." But the hall ended abruptly into empty void filled with the night sky. Afilae looked into the chasm before her and saw emptiness and a great fall into unseen depths.

"You cannot jump across the gulf before you," spoke the Prince. "You cannot save your beloved unless you choose me."

"No," said Afilae. "I see the answer." And stepped into the void. She did not fall for the vision of darkness fluttered away, broken. Only the empty hall lay before her and she walked forward.

"Can you see your beloved now? There he is, waiting for you now," spoke the Prince. Surely too, for there he was at the end of the great hall, sitting before the empty seat of the Prince.

"My love!" called out Sir Tristani and rose to embrace her. "Why have you come here?"

"I have come to rescue you so that we may be married," Afilae said to him. "My father, the Baron of Troisfurd, would like to see his only daughter given to a worthy husband."

"Yes my beloved. We shall get married, my dear Roannon."

"I am not Roannon of Troisfurd, but Afilae of Eldansgen. Your third enchantment, Prince, is undone!" Sir Tristani's image dissolved into mud and twigs that collapsed at her feet.

"You have met the Challenge of the Dawn, and thus gained your love," said the Prince and the torches blazed with fresh light.

IV

The Prince of Malabar emerged from beyond the tapestries that hung along the walls with

forty warriors. Then several more emerged from a side chamber bearing the unarmed form of Sir Tristani. "You may take him, then, Afilae of Eldansgen. I give you my word that no one will attack you here in my lands and I give you word of safe passage to Kalimar."

"On your word and honour, Prince?" asked Afilae.

"Oh, you are a clever one! Yes, my personal honour. Any harm to you or Sir Tristani and I will personally see that vengeance is done to them."

No one would dare break such a vow for all feared the Prince too much.

She was given horses and saddles and they rode back. But Sir Tristani said no word until they reached the bridge for they dared not tarry in Malibar. Upon crossing it, he turned to Afilae and spoke.

"Thank you for bringing me away from Caer Ferrofang, Afilae. But why you and not one of my fellows?"

"None would help save me for there is much afoot in the land. When we return, we can get married and put this all aside us," said she.

"I do not think so. You've changed too much and are no longer the lady I once knew. I cannot marry you."

"Oh cur! Then go and begone with you!" And so he rode off.

But Afilae could not believe such rejection by Sir Tristani and rode to Caer Faeracros to speak with King Kole. At the gate she was challenged by several of the knights of the castle and overcame them in single combat and entered to stand in front of the king.

King Kole looked at the warrior woman before him and asked her, "Who are you and what is it you seek? You have defeated several of my knights and proved a worthy opponent and ally."

"I am Afilae, whose request to free Sir Tristani you put aside. I rescued him myself."

Adrexis entered the hall and stood beside the king. "It is true. I taught her and equipped her, though I warned her, she fought her way into Malibar and rescued Sir Tristani. He is outside, having returned an hour ago."

"Then Afilae, though you are not the lady I once knew, I will give you my ear," said Kole and listened to Afilae's tale.

She finished her story and said to him. "Now he seeks to break our vows for he will not have me because I am no longer as beautiful or as frail as he would have me be."

Kole looked at Sir Tristani as he stepped forward and turned to Afilae. "Would you still have him?" She looked at Sir Tristani and replied, "No. I guess I will not. If he cannot accept me for what I am then I will not have him."

Kole gave his judgement then, for he stood up and struck her with his fist. She did not flinch but said with a fury, "For what reason must I be punished for doing the deeds that no knight would do?"

Kole said to her. "But a knight did. You. I did not punish you, but made you a full knight of this court and equal to any warrior before you who has faced such dangers with such honor and bravery."

Afilae was married, but to a son of King Fengil of Aeos. She bore a son who became a powerful noble of the Kingdom of Enerar; this was after the fall of Kalimar by the agency of the evil spirit known as the Prince of Hail. Afilae fell, before the disappearance of Caer Faeracros, at the battle of Garundas taking on the Bodyguard of King Geas.

HARP OF THE ANCIENTS

O Ancient Ages! wind the wind high.
Sing through my Celt fed fingers
 harp of the soul sent flying
when joy jumps beyond the heart
and needs a world to hear it cry.

Play the strings set to wood and stone.
Let air be wild sound transformed.
 Music distilled from starlight
and poured like benisons from night blooms
 fills the vale where I wait alone.

The warrior's voice is his soul under sail.
It tells of his questing passage
 posterity revered
 and charted for clear direction
by those whose treasure is more than to prevail.

Melodies crooned by mothers long past
 carry strong messages still
 and we tremble at our connection
when the harp that rings and thrills our ages
pulls deep where ancestral drums beat fast.

--Owen Neill

BLUE STAR

Judith L.Tucker

Indigo sat on the dragon's back holding a golden neck brace that Mythrod wore when she went flying with him. She looked down at her best friend and sighed. "If that is the way you feel about it, alright," she said, and turned to the dragon. "I will find the Blue Star--"

"Blue Star?" Whisper asked, her eyes wide with interest. "What Blue Star?"

Mythrod flicked his fiery orbs at her. "What does it matter?" he rumbled. "You are not interested."

"I can change my mind," Whisper said, and climbed up the dragon's wing before he could argue. She leaned close to Indigo and wrapped her arms around her waist.

Indigo thought the grip that her friend was holding her with was more like a death-grip than a safety catch, but she kept quiet. She glanced at her friend and almost chuckled. The woman's face was white and sweat glistened on her brow. Whisper never did take these rides very well, but her greed overshadowed her fear. She leaned down to the dragon. "I think we're ready, Mythrod."

The dragon spread his wings and soared. Cold night air blasted their faces and tugged at their braids as the dragon climbed higher and higher. He took them through a mountain pass and Indigo knew Mythrod would be landing. She could feel Whisper's hold on her tighten as the dragon began his descent. Mythrod landed in a small clearing, the ground beneath the dragon shook.

Whisper looked around suspiciously. "Blue Star huh?" she said, sarcastically. "Fat chance we find it here."

Indigo raised an eyebrow. "You call yourself a thief?" she chided gently, unbuckling herself from her friend's grip. "Did you honestly think the Blue Star would be out in the open for all the world to see?"

"Are you insulting my abilities now?" Whisper snapped as she climbed down the dragon's wing. She looked up and scowled. "Or is this some trick of yours to get me to help you?"

Indigo climbed down after her, carefully avoiding her friend's look. "I do not need your stealth abilities this night my friend, but your swordsmanship."

"You did trick me!"

"It would not be the first time," Mythrod rumbled.

"You stay out of this," Whisper snapped at the silver scaled beast.

The dragon lowered his head, his fiery orbs gleamed dangerously as smoke began to rise from his nostrils.

Indigo intervened, artfully pushing her friend out of the path of the dragon. "So, I stretched the truth a little. Would you have come otherwise?"

The other woman shrugged her shoulders and flashed her a crooked smile. "Probably not," she said. "Okay, I'm in."

"Good because I really could use your help," Indigo said, slinging her harp pack over her shoulders. "The job must be done before the sun rises."

Mythrod rose. "I will come back for you at dawn," the dragon rumbled. Indigo nodded, reached out and caressed a silver scale. Dragons usually did not concern themselves with human causes--except this one.

The woods were silent except for the rustling of leaves at their feet. Darkness surrounded them but the glow of Indigo's magical harp guided their steps. An eerie feeling crept over the women as they drew closer to their destination.

Suddenly the high pitched wails of a woman broke the silence. Her wails sent chills of fear down their spines. "Attack!" Indigo shouted above the wail. She advanced, stroking the strings of her harp with all her concentration.

The horror rushed at them, her wail draining a year off each life. She attacked, her fingers reached up and grabbed Whisper's windpipe, lifting the woman off the ground as if she weighed no more than a feather. Indigo's fingers fumbled over a music spell, she cursed and tried again. She took a deep breath and let the energy flow from her fingers to the harp. The music weaved a knot of magic over Whisper's ashen face. The woman screamed in rage, throwing the rogue from her. She advanced on Indigo. Her fingers were weary, sweat beaded her brows, weaving that spell had doomed her. The horror wailed in glee, waiting for the harp's strings to quiet before she went in for the kill.

Indigo gazed at the horror without malice as the last ebb of her strength left her. Its red eyes glittered. "Your soul is mine, Harper!" she cackled. "When I have finished with you, I will have your friend's soul too. No one takes the Blue Star from me!"

The horror's eyes widened first in shock, then in agony as a sword penetrated her flesh. She screamed, tossing her arms forward, trying to wrap her fingers around the tender flesh of Indigo's neck. She turned to dust at the harper's feet.

"Did you think I'd let you have all the fun?" Whisper asked, wiping her sword clean on the ground cover.

Indigo smiled wearily up at her friend. "No." She rose stiffly. "What we seek is just yonder through those trees."

Whisper arched an eyebrow. "And the Blue Star?"

"Is there," Indigo said, resettling her harp over her shoulder. "We do not have much time."

They broke through the trees, and moonlight sparkled off the clear water of the lake. A mist hovered near the lake's edge. It saw them and reshaped itself into a small child.

"You have slain the horror that guards this part of the woods?" the mist-child asked, incredulously.

"We have," Indigo said to the mist.

"Then that can only mean you have come for the Blue Star." The mist-child rose and circled first to Indigo, who stood calm and let the mist touch her, opening her thoughts to the child. Satisfied, the mist then surrounded Whisper, who drew back at the private invasion of her thoughts. She looked wide eyed at Indigo and clutched her sword for comfort. The child only shrugged and returned to the lake.

"To obtain the Blue Star, you must answer a riddle," the mist said. "Will you answer the riddle I put before you?"

"What is your riddle?" Indigo asked, "and I will see if I can answer it."

"Of course you can answer it," Whisper said, softly into her ear. "Riddles are your specialty, next to your harp playing."

Indigo silently concentrated on the mist.

The child sighed and let forth his riddle. "What strips a child of dignity, and leaves scars?"

Sorrow crept into Indigo's eyes as she gazed back at the mist-child. "Lies."

Suddenly, the lake began to bubble and a large Blue Star shot up from the surface of the water. Whisper's eyes bulged, but Indigo stood and stared at the mist. It floated to the Star and seeped inside. The Star exploded into a million shards and inside a boy child appeared. Not human. Not animal.

He fluttered his wings cautiously and bowed before them. "The horror trapped me many centuries ago," he said. "It was your bravery that has freed me. Now I can go home."

They watched him spread his wings and fly upward to the heavens and disappear out of sight.

Indigo turned to see her friend's glum look. She laughed. "Cheer up, you're a hero." "I don't want to be a hero. I want a jewel the size of that child," she grumbled.

"How would you carry the stone home?" Indigo asked, walking away from the lake. "And even if you were to carry it back, do you think Mythrod would let you keep it?"

Whisper scowled. "Perhaps it's better the jewel shattered."

"Quite right," Indigo agreed. "I wouldn't want to argue with a dragon either."

--JT

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THE DEMON OF THE COPPER GATE

Mark Noe

Murasaki went with the rest of them--to laugh.

It was the outing of the season; the weather had finally turned warm, the cherry blossoms were starting to bloom. Ekazome and Senji, two other ladies of the court, and she took a curtained cart so they could ride through the bustling streets of Kyoto without being touched, or even seen, by the common masses.

The boy at the gate had been everything they had promised. She laughed, though she spent more time laughing at herself than at him. Here she thought of him as a boy, yet he was barely a year younger than she. It was not his age, but his uncouth speech and complete lack of courtliness that made her think of him as a boy.

She'd been in attendance the day he'd come to court, rough spoken, with a wild country accent, and the dirt of the road still clinging to him. He'd begged an audience before the Emperor, then come into court barely able to make the required bow, and certainly without grace.

"I have come," he said, passing over the customary formalities, "to seek the murderer of my father."

The court fell silent, wondering if the Emperor would have the boy killed on the spot. Instead, he tittered.

The court laughed. The boy was amusing.

The Emperor signaled the Lord Chamberlain. "What became of the boy's father?"

The Lord Chamberlain whispered something in the Emperor's ear. The Emperor laughed aloud. The court laughed, though nervously this time. One laughed when the Emperor laughed, and frowned when he frowned. But it was safer to know why.

"Your father," the Emperor told the boy, "was devoured by the Demon of the Copper Gate."

The court laughed with ease then, grateful at being let in on the joke.

"Then," the boy said, "if it please the Emperor, let me rid the City of this demon, and with that service, have my revenge."

"Oh, please do." The Emperor giggled. "Please do."

The boy walked out, actually turning his back on the Emperor. Though everyone was laughing so hard no one noticed except Murasaki.

They say the boy had gone immediately to the Copper Gate. He stood, day and night, a sword at his side, waiting for the demon to appear. That had been mid-winter. As the weather warmed, it became fashionable to take a cart down to the Copper Gate and laugh at the boy.

If he noticed, he didn't show it. Murasaki was told he even slept under the arch of the bridge, waiting for the demon.

She found it amusing, like all the rest, till the day she went down herself to see. The three of them had watched the boy from behind the curtains, laughing at his silliness. Murasaki wished they could have gotten closer. She wanted to see the youth's sword. It wasn't a ceremonial instrument, like those carried by the courtiers, but a real weapon. Perhaps, she thought, it might have even tasted blood in the petty clan wars that took place so far from court. Of course, she said nothing of her thoughts to the other two ladies. She already had a reputation at court for her morbid interests. A certain amount of eccentricity was useful. Show yourself too different, and become an outsider. Which could be deadly.

Their amusement had just about waned, and they were ready to return to the palace, when



they spotted the Lord Chamberlain and his chief retainer strolling under the arch of the bridge. The two men stopped for a moment and talked to the youth, then strolled in the direction of the ladies' cart.

The other two started giggling, and Murasaki joined in, though she found such antics frivolous. But it was during just such chance meetings that trysts were set up, a necessity of court life, or at least court survival. While they watched the two approach, they wondered among themselves who the two men would speak of.

They strolled casually up to the cart, then stopped, turning their back to the curtained vehicle, and looked over the squalid market as though admiring the view.

"What of Murasaki?" the retainer asked, and the other two women started their giggling all over again. "She is a comely woman, well thought of, and a poet besides."

Murasaki felt herself go cold inside. Surely the Lord Chamberlain did not intend to renew his suit. He had approached her six months ago, and she had turned his entreaties aside. She'd only been able to do so because he had made them in private. Now, she had witnesses. She would not be able to refuse him so lightly.

"And," the retainer continued, "she has royal blood."

"Tosh," the Lord Chamberlain replied, "she has so little royal blood in her veins it would take no more than a pin prick on one finger to drain it."

At those words, the other ladies fell silent. Murasaki shuddered. The fear she had felt a moment before was nothing compared to what she felt now.

The Lord Chamberlain and his retainer wandered off. They had delivered their message, a veiled threat to Murasaki--her life was in danger.

The two other women in the cart would not meet her gaze.

Murasaki wanted to say something, but she did not know what to say. One did not laugh such things off. This threat was very real, for all it being delivered in such a roundabout way.

But what had she done? She had been at the court long enough to know better than to become embroiled in the petty intrigues that surrounded the Emperor. There were at least four hundred individuals at court who had some royal blood in their veins. Each was jockeying for a position closer to the Peacock Throne. And the Lord Chamberlain played one against another.

Murasaki's mother and father were both dead. Her mother when she was a child, and her father soon after coming to the court from the provinces. She knew better than to press her suit without a family to back her.

No, this could have nothing to do with succession politics. And it was not due to her snubbing him last year. Even the Lord Chamberlain did not kill people for such things.

He wanted something of her. But she did not know what, so how could she give it to him? She had to find out more. But as soon as they got back to the palace, she knew Ekazome and Senji would spread the tale. Within the hour, she would be a pariah. No one would tell her anything.

She looked at the two, their eyes still cast down, waiting for her to accept her fate like a sheep. Well, she would not!

"Rumors are dangerous things," she said, choosing her words carefully. "They are like bees. Sometimes you can catch them in a jar. Sometimes, they fly back and sting the one who releases them." Neither would look up. She had to be sure they understood. "A wise woman, when intrigue at the court grows too--unpleasant--retires to a monastery in the country for a few weeks of quiet contemplation."

At that, Ekazome looked up.

Murasaki smiled at her. She knew she was going too far. But one who is under a death warrant can risk much.

"Say a prayer for me," Murasaki told her. Then she pushed the curtain aside and stepped off the cart. Both women gasped.

"They wish to go to the Todaiji Monastery," Murasaki told the driver. "Take them there. I will find my own way back to the court."

The driver looked confused. Murasaki thought for a moment, then removed a jade amulet from around her neck and pushed it into his hand. "Do as I tell you."

The man looked down at the amulet in his palm, then at Murasaki. He grinned, and led the cart away.

Murasaki looked over the market. Despite her bravado, she was frightened. This was the first time she had been abroad in the city alone. She wasn't even sure she knew the way back to the palace.

Then she saw the golden robes of the Lord Chamberlain on the other side of the market, moving away from her. Grabbing the hem of her kimono so it did not drag the ground, she hurried after him.

Passing between the stalls, she almost lost sight of him. The aromas, the colors, all excited her. Not here the scent of rose petals in water, or the dark hues of discreetly placed screens. Instead, the smell of cooking spices, and bright banners.

From the confines of the cart, this place had seemed so squalid. Now, it looked so alive. She wished she could stop and take it all in. But she had no time. She had to keep the Lord Chamberlain in sight.

She just prayed he did not turn around. She knew she must look as out of place here as the boy at the gate had looked at Court.

But he did not look back. Neither did he return to the Palace, but entered an apothecary shop nestled in a narrow alley. It was not a place one would enter casually. He had to have known it was there.

Murasaki watched from down the alley till he left, a lacquer box tucked under his arm, his retainer still following. What had been important enough for him to pick up himself? One sent servants to shops.

She watched the Lord Chamberlain walk up the alley, putting aside her resolve to follow him. When he was out of sight, she went into the apothecary's.

A thin, bald man with a protruding belly stood mixing something with a mortar and pestle. He looked up expectantly, then froze when he saw Murasaki. He looked nervous. As well he should. It was not often a common merchant had someone of the Lord Chamberlain's stature come into his shop. And now to have a lady of the Court. Murasaki pitied him.

"The Lord Chamberlain decided that six ounces of powdered ginseng was not enough. He will require six more."

"Ginseng?" the man said, a quiver in his voice. "He bought Black Leaf. A full ounce."

"Oh, then I must be mistaken," Murasaki said, and quickly left.

Black Leaf? What would the Lord Chamberlain want with Black Leaf? Poisoning was a woman's prerogative.

She considered these puzzles while she wandered through the market. She had lost the Lord Chamberlain, and she soon realized she had lost her way as well. Though it didn't seem to matter. The bustling life of the market thrilled her as the court had not in a long time. How had she seen the stilted confines of that place as the epitome of life? This was life. And it called

to her as the court never had. Yet, she knew this place was denied her as surely as the court was denied the common people.

The palace was less difficult to find than she thought. Any wide thoroughfare in the city led to the palace. She followed the first one she came across back, and entered through a small gate that led into the gardens.

The guard at the gate must have been curious. She knew this must be the first time he had ever seen a lady of the court enter the palace on foot. Yet, he said nothing.

Murasaki went directly to the Empress's antechamber. She knew she would have little time to lose. The Lord Chamberlain would soon learn that the two women he had depended on spreading rumors about Murasaki were no longer in the city.

She found scarcely a half-dozen women on duty, since the Empress was asleep. Murasaki sat amongst them and waited. The gossip, usually so interesting, sounded stilted to her this day. Eventually, as she knew it would, the gossip turned to the boy at the Copper Gate.

"But what of his father?" Murasaki inserted into the conversation. That was all she had to do.

"He was the Governor of one of the Outer Provinces."

They all laughed. The rulers of the Outer Provinces were all bores. But necessary bores. For it was they who kept the bandits and nomads out of the Inner Kingdom.

"He came to the court," one of them continued, "to petition the Emperor to give him control of the province adjoining his."

"Which of course, he would never do."

"Of course," Murasaki agreed, hoping someone would tell her why, but unwilling to show too much interest in the answer.

"It was under the direct governorship of the Lord Chamberlain," another added, and laughed as though it were all a wonderful joke.

"Rumor has it that the original governor took ill unexpectedly, leaving no heir, and no marriageable daughter."

Murasaki looked from one woman to another, realizing for the first time how petty their gossip was. They were going farther than they would have dared had the Empress been awake.

"Which province?" she asked.

They looked at her blankly, as though that could hardly matter.

"Hon Chi?" one girl ventured.

Murasaki shivered as all the pieces shifted into place, like a blob of ink on rice paper that suddenly becomes a blossom with the last deft stroke of the artist.

Anyone who had been at court long enough could read through their innuendos. The Lord Chamberlain had murdered the governor of Hon Chi. Then, when this boy's father, the governor of a bordering province had come to petition for it, he had murdered him to cover up his crime.

They only had one thing wrong, the Provincial Governor had left a daughter, she simply had not yet been of age.

Not till six months ago. When the Lord Chamberlain had pressed his suit, she had dissuaded him, until this boy came from the provinces. Now, he knew he must do something about her. If he could not marry her, he would kill her.

Murasaki nodded, then waited till the gossip had gone on to something else before rising to leave. She went back to her own chamber, and to sleep, leaving instructions with her serving girl to wake her an hour before midnight.

When she was awakened she turned to the girl. "Give me your clothes."

The girl looked startled.

"I know you're not deaf. Give me your clothes. Do not worry. I will not require you to go around naked. I will give you mine. Wear them, if you will. They might catch you a husband. Or sell them. I do not care."

They exchanged clothes. Murasaki found an unguarded gate, and was alone on the streets of Kyoto for the second time in her life. Before she reached the Copper Gate she found a well, and poured water over her head, pulling her carefully coiffed hair into tangles. She ripped the sleeve of her servant's kimono, and grabbed hands full of dirt to rub into the clothing and her own face.

She had never actually seen a witch, only read of them in stories. But she hoped by the time she reached the Copper Gate she looked the part, at least to a boy from the provinces.

Earlier that day, when traffic in and out of the gate had been at its highest, he had looked like a boulder in a fast running stream as the water eddied around it. Now, he looked forlorn and lonely.

A brass brazier sat at his feet, yet he did not seem to be aware of the cold.

Murasaki, affecting a stooped gait, hobbled up, and in a high, carefully unschooled voice asked, "Will you share the warmth of your coals for a moment."

"Step up, Old Mother," the youth replied.

Old Mother indeed! She might not be considered one of the greatest beauties at court, but there were no ugly women at court. And neither was her acting that good.

She stepped closer. "Let me repay your kindness by telling your fortune," Murasaki said.

"I need no fortune," the boy replied. "I know my fate. I will kill the Demon of the Copper Gate, and so revenge the murder of my father. Or he will kill me, and so end our line."

At that Murasaki cackled. "You are a fool, boy."

He looked at her curiously, and then smiled. It was a warm smile, and it startled Murasaki.

"I have been called worse than that since I began my vigil."

"And you will be worse than that if you continue it."

"Others have tried to dissuade me from my duty, Old Mother."

"I would not to dissuade you, only to put you on the path of doing it. Do you think you accomplish anything waiting here for a demon that does not exist?"

He watched her now, his curiosity aroused.

"There is no demon of the Copper Gate. For all I know there are no demons, except men."

"Then why did the Emperor send me here?"

"Double the fool. Know you not what a euphemism is? In court no one says what they mean. If a man wishes to bed a woman, he does not simply tell her. He 'admires her poetry'. If a man is assassinated, murdered, it depends on how the thing is done. A man who is strangled has been 'sent to the country'. Someone killed in a duel has 'drowned himself in the Pool of Sorrows'. One who has been poisoned has been 'devoured by the Demon of the Copper Gate'. If you look for the murderer of your father, you need to look for a man, not a demon."

While she spoke, the boy's face darkened. He slowly aged before her eyes, till he was a man. He had never been as stupid as he seemed. Only simple, as country folk are.

"If I look for a man, who would I look for?"

"Your father came to Court to petition for the Governorship of Hon Chi. Who stood to lose if he gained it?"

"No one."

"Think boy. Who holds the wealth of that province in their grasp? Who stands to lose if it is placed in other hands?"

After a moment, understanding lit his eyes.

Word had spread across the palace by the time Murasaki wakened the next morning. The Lord Chamberlain had 'drowned himself in the Pool of Sorrows'.

The boy who hunted the Demon at the Copper Gate challenged him in the presence of the Emperor. They said the Lord Chamberlain laughed at him. Till the Emperor bid him accept the challenge.

The Lord Chamberlain owned a beautiful sword, its hilt resplendent with jewels. The end had been swift.

The boy was being given his father's province, where he could face the barbarians with his sword, and be far from court.

Murasaki was called into the presence of the new Lord Chamberlain at the end of the ten days of mourning. The new Lord Chamberlain sent his own retainer away, and regarded Murasaki from across his writing table. Pursing his fingers, he studied her over their tips.

Murasaki watched him. Eventually, she knew her connection with Hon Chi would be discovered. Then, every High Lord with too many gambling debts would be trying to force her to marry him. She had thought she would have more time than this.

"I do not know how you arranged things, only that my predecessor is dead at your hands, whoever spilt the blood. Had you elected to stay out of politics I might be inclined to ignore you, as I do all poets. You have not, and you are too good at the game. As ruthless as any man. And you cannot be ignored." He studied her for a moment, then made a note on a paper. "You will be sent to the country."

Murasaki gasped.

"No, no. I am not going to have you killed, though that might be the simplest, if less elegant, solution. You will be married to a governor of one of the provinces. I'm told they have a taste for women from the court. And in my experience, marriage is the most effective way to neutralize a woman."

He went back to his papers, and Murasaki knew the interview was over.

"Who?" she asked.

He looked up.

"Who will you marry me to?"

He considered her for a moment. "I believe that boy, the one they are calling Demon Slayer. He will need a wife now that he is a Provincial Governor. You will leave with him in the morning, for Ichin, where you can do no more damage."

"What of Hon Chi?"

"No, I will not give it to him. Control of two such provinces would make him too powerful indeed. It will go to the original Governor's heirs. If they are ever found."

As Murasaki left the new Lord Chamberlain, she smiled a secret smile. She would go with the Demon Slayer. They saw banishment from the court as the worst punishment. Worse than death. But the court no longer held the allure that it once had. No, this would not be banishment. It would be a home-coming.

RHAMADUS

Gerald Upton

Word flashed through the elvish town of Ternius; Rhamadus was approaching. This threw the whole town into a panic, which was unaccountable. No-one knew exactly who or what Rhamadus was.

The rumours were flying thick and fast. They differed from each other to a great degree. The only consistent facts contained in them were: a) Rhamadus was big, ugly, scaly, and completely invincible, and; b) as Rhamadus was approaching from the east, everyone in town had pressing business somewhere to the west.

Everybody was panicking. They were quickly snatching up whatever valuables were ready to hand and easy to carry, (usually their own), and leaving town in unelf-like haste.

Such a one was the owner of the single small tavern in town. He glanced about his small serving room, at the chairs and tables scattered about in random order, checking his present three patrons casually. "Last call, gentle folk," he called. "We're closing in an hour. Rhamadus is heading this way." Then he began to wipe the last of the recently washed glasses.

The patron that was by himself, the elder elf with the sad eyes and the streaks of grey in his hair, departed in haste. He stood up slowly after five or so minutes, and walked steadily out the door.

The other two were sharing a table, deep in conversation, discussing what they knew about Rhamadus, and what had to be done about his coming. The shorter one raised his hand, signalling for one last round.

He looked at his taller companion, who had his tongue stuck out and cupped, and was dribbling the last few drops of a thick, clear, oily liquid into the slight hollow. "How can you drink that stuff, Ptron?"

The other retracted his tongue. His thin cheeks moved slightly as he rolled the tongue about in his mouth, savouring the taste of the liquid. After a pause, his eyes opened again, showing the slitted irises. "Easy, Vadim. I like it."

The shorter elf managed to work up some slight indignation. "You like it!? It's vile!" This was an amiable argument they'd had many times before.

"Yeah," said Ptron, and paused. "I know it tastes like acid that's leaked out of the backside of a dragon, but that's just one of its good points. It also helps me forget."

Vadim looked at him levelly. "Forget what?"

Ptron paused for thought. "Well, to be exact, right at this point I can't quite think what."

The short elf looked at him indignantly. "What good is that? How can you possibly forget something, if you don't know what it is?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you tomorrow. If I remember." He paused, and peered blearily at Vadim. "You're certainly one to talk. Look at what you like to drink."

"What's wrong with Dwarven beer?" asked Vadim quickly.

Ptron glared at him as if he'd just asked the all-time stupidest question. "For someone who is so concerned about his height, or lack of it, it is strange that you like to drink something that is made by, well short people."

Vadim scowled back. "You're really reaching there, aren't you?"

At this point the publican arrived at their table, and set down a glass and a mug. "Last service, folks. We'll be closing soon." He scooped some of the loose coins scattered about the table, and turned to go.

Ptron scowled blearily at his retreating back. "How come he's closing so soon, Vadim? Why, it's not even dawn yet."

"He's closing up early because of Rhamadus."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot." His face slowly turned into a question. "What's a Rhamadus?"

"Big scaly monster. Invincible. Coming from the east. Gonna destroy the town and everyone in it."

"Oh, THAT Rhamadus. Maybe we better leave too, if it's so invincible."

"I thought you agreed we were going to fight it. You know, save the town. Become heroes."

Ptron's swimming brain clutched at the one word he had clearly understood. "Fight? Oh, Gods, Vadim, don't start another bar brawl. Who insulted you this time?"

"No, no, I'm talking about Rhamadus."

"How could he have insulted you? He's not even here yet."

Vadim let his forehead fall to his propped hand in resignation, and also as a necessary support. After a moment he lifted his head again to gaze morosely at Ptron. "Shut up, finish your drink, and get your stuff. We're leaving."

"Where we going? I thought you said there was going to be a fight?"

"There is, Ptron. We're going to Chiton Pass. This Rhamadus creature has to pass through there to get to this village. Unless he can fly."

"What's a Rhamadus?"

Ptron was lying in the middle of the narrow road, his eyes closed. "Vadim?"

"Yeah?"

"Wake me when we get to the pass, will you?"

"We're there, Ptron."

"We are? How'd we get here?"

"We walked, like we always do. Or, in your case, stumbled."

"Yeah? Well, wake me up when something happens."

"Okay. Wake up, Ptron. Something's happening."

"C'mon, can't you let a guy sleep? What's happening?" He opened his eyes. "My Gods! What's that big bright round thing up in the sky?!"

"It's the Lantern of the Gods, Ptron. It's found you out again. Now get up."

Ptron pushed the world away from him, and managed to make it unsteadily to his feet. "Now, what's so all-fired important that you had to get me up?"

"Oh, not much Ptron. Just that big scaly ugly creature headed rapidly this way. Get out your bow, and let's send it a few hunting arrows in friendly greeting."

"Hunh? Where is it?"

"Slung across your back, where you always keep it."

"No, no, the monster. I know where my bow is."

"Are you sure? Okay, the monster is over there. See where I'm pointing?"

"By the Gods' Holy Outhouse! There are two of them, Vadim!"

"There are?"

"Yeah. It's bad enough having to contend with one of those bug ugly brutes, but two? What are they? How are we going to fight them?"

"We'll start by using arrows. We'll pepper him.... them as they come up."

"Oh. Okay. Wait! I've lost all my arrows!"

"Try your other side, Ptron."

"Oh. Yeah. Thanks, Vadim. Now, which one do you want to shoot at first?"

"Shoot right between them, Ptron. That way, if you miss, you'll hit one of them."

"What a logical idea."

"Uh, Ptron?"

"Yeah?"

"Your arrow."

"What about it?"

"Feathers go at the back, remember?"

"You don't have to tell me that, Vadim."

They fired off several arrows each. Ptron became exuberant. "Hey, Vadim, these must be magical arrows I've got."

"What do you mean?"

"Each time I fire one, it turns into two, and each one hits a creature." Pause. "If the arrows are so magical, how come they're just bouncing off?"

"He must be one pretty tough customer, Ptron. Try shooting at his eyes. They should be vulnerable."

"Which one's eyes ?"

"Just shoot, okay?! He's getting awfully close!"

They managed to fire off a couple more shots each. Then they paused, and Ptron asked, "Why's he stopped, Vadim?"

"I don't know. It certainly isn't because we've hurt him."

"Why's he rearing up like that? Gods, he's huge! How many teeth do you think he has, Vadim?"

"I don't think I can count that high. More than enough to do the job, I'm sure."

"Why do you think he has all those horn things sticking out around his head?"

"I don't think we really want to find out."

"He's sort of like a giant scaled snake with lots of legs, isn't he? Hades, does he have bad breath!"

"Yes, Ptron, lots of legs with lots of claws on them. Thank you for pointing that out. Now, why don't you just toss your bow aside and get out your sword, hm, Ptron? I think you're going to need it in a moment."

"Vadim?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we have a chance against him?"

"Do you know what, Vadim. For the first time in ...several days, I feel completely sober. Unfortunately, I don't think it's going to help me one bit. How about we run?"

"It's a little late for that, I think."

As Vadim regarded the slightly swaying creature towering high above him, an alien thought formed in his mind: >Who are you, puny creatures, who recklessly stand in my way?<

"Us? We're elves," replied Vadim carefully, "here to defend our home valley; the one behind us."

"Are you two pathetic little two-legs here to fight against me, then?"

Ptron spoke up quickly, "Well, no, actually. It's, um, just a matter of, um, coincidence, really. You see, we were just headed for...."

"Yes!" cried Vadim defiantly. The monster's huge eyes shifted to concentrate on Vadim.

>Do you realize, tiny one, that you would fit nicely in my maw? Although perhaps not the other one; he might stick out here and there.<

"Look!" Vadim said sharply. "Are you making disparaging remarks about my height?"
 Ptron whispered a harsh and loud aside, "Vadim, not now! He wants to eat us!"

>Actually, perhaps not.< came the foreign thought, >I'm in a bit of a hurry here. Can we get this over with quickly?<

"By all means," said Vadim, bringing up his sword.

"Could we maybe do this tomorrow?" asked Ptron, "I'm not feeling so good."

>Perhaps we could come to some sort of mutually satisfactory arrangement,< thought the creature, >I'm trying to cut down on between-meal treats anyway, you know. I'm getting a little overweight, and it slows me down.<

"No! You shall not pass!" cried Vadim.

"What do you suggest?" asked Ptron of the creature.

Two more of the creature's legs lifted off the ground as it strained to see further into the distance. >Is that your village down there? That collection of boxes amongst the trees? That's what you are defending?<

"Yes!"

"Yes?"

>How about this, then. If you let me pass, I shall go around the village and try not to harm anything. I really am in a hurry.<

"Think we can trust him?" whispered Vadim to Ptron.

>Please! I'm a creature of my thought."<

"Huh?!"

>Here, let me see. Ah, I have it. Your nearest equivalent would be a 'man of his word'. My thought is my bond.<

"Oh! Well, I guess we'll just have to trust you, then," replied Ptron.

>It's either that, or I eat you.<

"In that case, please, go right on through. You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Monster." They stepped to either side.

As the creature started to lumber past them, slowly picking up speed, a further thought came. >Why was it that you felt I would ravage your village? You just don't smell like my kind of food, you know.<

Vadim replied, "Well, we heard that Rhamadus does that sort of thing, you know."

>Aha! I see in your mind that you thought I was Rhamadus. Why, I'm really very flattered.<

Together, "You're not Rhamadus!?"

>Oh, no. He's *much* bigger than I am. In fact, he's the reason I'm in such a hurry right now. He's chasing me.

"He'll be along any minute now."<

THE FELLAHIN AND THE DJINNI

Corey Brand

Curious he had not noticed it before. Kahlil al-Mu'min had been to the hill with his sheep a dozen times, but this was the first time he had seen the clay urn jutting between two pieces of broken sandstone.

It took a while to free his discovery from the sun-baked earth. Unfortunately, Kahlil had nothing but his wooden staff with which to dig. When he was finally able to remove it, he saw that the urn was nearly a cubit tall and half a cubit wide. He fumbled around with it for a moment and noted it was hermetically sealed despite the fact the weight suggested it was empty. Disappointed, the thought of gold and buried treasure quickly evaporated from his mind.

Still, it was a mystery and a pleasant distraction. If there were once inscriptions or colorful glazes on the urn, the desert soil had long since eroded them away. He knew it would not sell for much in the bazaar, and whoever would buy it would need to break it open in order to get inside. Might as well let it be me, he thought. No sense in letting someone else have all the fun.

He placed the urn securely on the ground before him. Then he took his staff, which he knew to be strong and heavy, and raised it over his head. With a clubbing motion, he brought it swiftly down. Then again. And again.

The brilliant light of the desert sun banished five hundred years of dark isolation. It came streaming in through the fracture, and Marjanah al-Mitra rose up in a golden cloud to greet it. She emerged from the broken urn and took a place in the air directly over it.

There she first looked to the young fellahin who had just freed her from her prison. He stood there handsomely in his white caftan. A mild breeze ruffled his dark, curly hair. After what seemed to be a long and awkward silence, his face drew into a smile. "A djinni!" he exclaimed. Then he fell silent again.

Marjanah was amused. "You are correct," she said. "And you have freed me from the urn. For that I am deeply indebted to you. It has always been the code of the djin to repay our debts, so I am prepared to grant you your heart's one true desire. Take a moment to decide what it is you truly want, and then I will grant your wish."

The young fellahin blinked. "You are going to grant me a wish?" he asked.

"I am," Marjanah answered. "One favor merits one favor."

The young man thought for a moment. "I am nothing more than a humble shepherd," he said after his long pause. "Every day I have seen men come and go with the caravans, and every night after my sheep are asleep I lie awake dreaming about travelling with them and visiting far away lands. But I do not have the money to book passage, and I must tend to my sheep. Oh, if only I were wealthy, then all my troubles would be over."

There could not have been an easier wish, she thought. The al-Hamra Desert abounded with riches. Men had hidden their earthly treasures within it for centuries.

"Very well," she said to him. "This is what you must do: Return to your village and obtain a mule, a chest, a shovel, and a rope. Then return here this time tomorrow, and I will guide you to your treasure."

The fellahin seemed suddenly disappointed. "But I would have to sell my sheep and everything I own to afford such things," he objected. "You cannot simply make this treasure appear before me now!"

Marjanah shook her head. "Such a feat is beyond my powers," she answered. "Besides, how would you transport it back to the village? Many men desire wealth, but this path is often



paved with sacrifice."

The young man said nothing for a while, and Marjanah began to think his heart was not in his wish. She watched him turn to face the distant horizon.

"When I was twelve," he said after a while, "I went to the village alchemist and asked him if he could turn my copper gizas into gold ones. He sat me down, then he told me the same thing about alchemy. I didn't understand it at the time, but now I do. I will do what you say."

Marjanah smiled. "I'm glad you understand," she said. "Now I can help you."

The next afternoon Kahlil gathered his newly acquired possessions and made his way back to the hill where the djinni awaited. He rode the mule in silence, and he dreamed of alchemists and digging for gold. How fortunate he was, he thought, he had decided not to sell the urn at the bazaar.

The land was hard and rocky. Kahlil knew it was named the al-Hamra Desert (or Red-House Desert) because its stones were deep red. The people of the al-Hamra built their houses from these red stones. But not all the tribes of the al-Hamra built stone houses. There were many nomadic tribes in the desert. These tribes were poor, and they often resorted to robbery of the caravans and lonely travellers. These thoughts also occupied his mind as the village that was his home passed from view behind the hills and sandy dunes. He would have to be careful should he be required to travel far to acquire his treasure.

When the familiar hill came into view, it seemed lonely and deserted. The silence of the desert surrounded it. He missed his flock and their familiar sounds. When he reached its base, a small dust-devil suddenly whisked past him and twirled up to the top of the hill. Then it materialized into the djinni. She hovered in the air, sitting on her golden cloud as if it were a silk pillow.

He urged his mule to the top, and it responded grudgingly. Then he stopped and wiped his brow. "I had some difficulties, but I obtained everything you requested," he said.

The djinni nodded her head approvingly.

Kahlil looked around at the painted landscape. He wondered where in the desert his treasure could be hidden.

"Follow me," the djinni told him. "I will guide you to your wish, then my debt to you will be repaid." She turned to leave.

As he followed her deeper into the desert, they talked. "What is it like to be a djinni?" he asked her at one point.

The djinni smiled at him. "You can speak with the earth and sky," she said. "What is it like to be a human?"

Kahlil thought about it carefully. "Well, you can't speak with the earth and sky," he answered.

"That's not true," she responded. "Your village alchemist can speak with them. It's how he can transform his metals into gold. You just have to listen very closely."

Then they walked in silence for a while.

It was another nearly cloudless day, and the sun shone very bright and hot. "Getting your wish granted by a djinni is not like I imagined it would be," Kahlil observed.

"Neither was getting your copper gizas turned into gold ones. By the way, did the alchemist ever agree to do it?"

"Actually, yes, he did. He wanted to show me the power of his magic. But then he threw them away because his code forbade alchemical gold to be used for enrichment. He was just satisfied with the fact he could turn other metals into gold. I couldn't see any point to it."

"You couldn't? It was not the gold that was important to him; it was the mastery of life. He had found his true potential."

Kahlil supposed he had.

He was about to speak again on another topic, but then the djinni stopped at a large boulder that blocked their immediate path.

"Dig here," she instructed.

Kahlil dismounted the mule and removed his shovel from its fastenings. He walked over to the spot where she was pointing and began to dig. Soon, he thought, he would be a rich young man.

Marjanah knew it was time to return home. There were no longer any earthly ties to bind her to the material realm. The young fellahin was happily digging away for his treasure, and already a portal to the aerial kingdom peered down at her from the blue heavens like a watchful eye. She looked at it with joy in her heart. How long had it been since she had seen her home? Nearly six hundred years.

She ascended to the opening. The red sands of the al-Hamra rapidly fell away, and she looked back only once to regard it for the last time.

That was when she saw the disaster about to transpire far below. A band of desert marauders were galloping their way on horseback across the open plains. The hooves of their black mounts kicked up a trail of dusty red clouds in their wake. Eventually, she knew, they would discover the young fellahin. When they would find him, they would kill him. He would not stand a chance against them.

It was too late for her to do much about it. She had already passed through the portal, and now it was beginning to close. She could not return through it.

There is nothing I can do, she told herself. The material world blinked out of sight, and she turned away because she couldn't bear to stand there anymore. She looked at the golden city before her and managed a brief smile. At least she was home. She could take comfort in that. The city of the djin was a beautiful place, and free from the troubles of the lower realms. The buildings were all white marble with gold inlay, and high towers overlooked the entire kingdom. Here, the sun and the moon were eternal friends instead of chasing each other from the sky each morning and night.

Still, she knew she could not forget the young fellahin and his dark fate.

There was a beautiful fountain surrounded by gold benches nearby, and she sat down on one of them. She didn't sit there for more than a few seconds before an old djinni came up and sat next to her.

"What troubles you, child?" he asked.

Marjanah didn't want his company, but the djin always respected their wise elders. "I am waiting for a young man to die," she answered.

"Oh? How so?"

Reluctantly, she told him. She told him about how he had freed her, and how she had led him into the desert to dig for treasure. She told him about how she had then left him to die at the hands of thieves.

"It's not fair," she said when she finished her account.

The old djinni placed a fatherly hand on her knee. "Dear child," he told her. "The human world is full of injustices. It's a muddled place. It's the price they pay for living in a material realm. You did the best you could. You did what you had to do."

"Did I?" she blurted. "I truly wanted to help him, but because of my carelessness he will

now die."

"You really do care for the young man, don't you?"

Marjanah nodded her head. "I want to save him."

"Do you know that if you are allowed to return to his world, and you save him from his destiny, you will be responsible for him until the rest of his days?"

"It is part of our code," she answered.

"And you are willing to do this?"

"Yes. I am."

The old djinni stood. "Then why are you waiting, child? Go to him, but you must also remember his destiny has already been written, and the unfolding of the universe will not easily allow amendments."

She looked up at where the old djinni was standing, but he was no longer there. Instead, she saw the bright light of the sun. Then she noticed the heat and the red sand of the al-Hamra. A large boulder had replaced the gold bench where she sat just moments before.

Not long after, the horsemen came riding up to her. They stopped when they saw her standing there. Their heads were wrapped with black kerchiefs, and they looked at her with dark and sinister eyes.

"This path is forbidden to you," she told them. "I will not allow you to pass through here."

Much to her surprise, the leader began to laugh. It was an extended, confident laugh. Soon, the others were also roaring with laughter.

When the laughter finally died down, the leader pulled back his cloak to reveal a brass lamp. "We have come for the treasure the spirit of this lamp revealed to us," he announced. "And nothing, not even you, djinni, will stop us."

Then he took the lamp, rubbed it, and evoked the spirit imprisoned within it.

The efreeti streamed from the spout in a thick red cloud and swirled in loose, irregular spirals before assuming its ruddy and vaguely humanoid shape. Its eyes, its teeth, its horns, its skin; indeed, everything about it, was red.

"What is it you desire, O Master?" it growled.

"Remove the obstacle," the man said almost casually.

"A djinni!" it exclaimed. It flared and clenched its fists. "A haughty djinni! But not for long, because I will scatter its days to the winds!"

The breeze delivered to her the stench of sulphur. Its burning smell only confirmed the old djinni's parting words. If she did not think fast, she, too, would die today.

The efreeti moved in to scorch and consume her. She looked to the sky, which seemed blue and distant. Then she spoke to the few clouds she found there.

It rained that day like Kahlil had never seen it rain in the desert before. It came from nowhere, and he felt lucky to have been able to take shelter next to the boulder near where he was digging. His mule had been nearly driven off during the storm, and it had taken him a while to calm it down after the rain abated.

He secured his treasure, a sizable amount of gems and gold coins, and hurried back to the safety of the village before more misfortune had a chance to strike. It was well known to him misfortune always followed on the heels of good fortune, and it seemed his luck was already running out.

Halfway back to the village, he saw what was yet another strange sight. A young maiden was making her way along, alone and on foot, a far distance away from safety or shelter.

"Today is no time to walk alone in the desert," he said riding up to her. "There are mysterious forces at work."

The young woman turned around and smiled at him. He thought she was very beautiful. She also appeared very familiar, but he could not say when he had seen her before. "Excuse me," he went on to say. "But do I know you?"

"Perhaps," she answered. "My name is Marjanah."

Kahlil knew no Marjanah, but he resolved he was going to.

--CB

THE HARP THAT TARA KNEW

I am the harp that Tara knew
when green rains came and blessed the magic trees
And we who carefree walked their talking shadows
knew songs of sadness even before Tuatha came
and strung their voices to another age.

I am the harp that Tara knew
all music even before the blackbird sang
and Ossian returned after hundreds of years
to find old age and the shadow of a cross
closing out his age of heroes.

I am the harp that Tara knew
when hazels changed to mead and hogs to supper
and bards reminded all their world was real
that night was cold and wild storms wailed
and wolves recalled the rise of morn.

I am the harp that Tara knew
the pendulum of crops and war
but not the clatter of a single town.
Here kings and cattle blended, bark green
and family dared beyond the hand's red stain.

I am the harp that Tara knew
when kings lived under heaven's roof
mantled tradition for Erin's soft clime.
Tribe willed as far as a king could see
and loyalty to death his follower's joy.

I am the harp that Tara knew
the Gael's true voice that found its crown
and many wore it by sword and song.
Happy to be sad was their legacy
in the mystic isle across a mystic sea.

--Owen Neill

DALLAMAR THE THIEF

Mark C. Alldis

Dallamar sat at the back of the tavern. He was, in his opinion, the best thief in Magnacor. No wall was too high or lock made that he could not pick, but his exploits did not get the recognition they deserved. He listened to people talk of the Black Silk Thief knowing it was himself, but he wanted something to set his reputation before he moved on to another city.

The tavern was a place for thieves, cutthroats and others whose work began when the sun went down. He sat in his usual table, his back to the wall at the rear of the tavern. Sipping his ale, he watched all who came and went with ferret-like eyes. The women with painted faces and hard eyes looked for clients. Men who watched their backs and talked in low voices while huddled around their tables. He saw a noble, his clothes worn but still too rich for the place, out for a night's excitement, but more likely to lose his purse.

Dressed in dark clothing from head to foot, Dallamar had a black cloak over his shoulders, the cowl thrown back to reveal a well trimmed beard and the pale face of one who sleeps most of the day away.

Two men sat down at the empty table beside him. One was small and wore a hood that concealed his features, the other was middle aged, well muscled and wore the facial tattoos of the Nacolli. The smaller man caught the eye of one of the serving girls and ordered a pot of ale and two mugs.

"I tell you it's a ruby as red as fresh spilt blood and the size of a boar's heart. They say that in the light it glows like fire," the small man said earnestly. He fell silent as a girl brought the ale and took his coin.

Dallamar's ears perked up, although the man had whispered he had caught most of what was said. He did not turn to look at the men but shifted closer to them.

The Nacolli grunted in disbelief.

"My brother has a friend who knows an assistant of Nabor the gem merchant. He says Nabor saw it and spoke of it," the small man exclaimed. "What would he gain by lying?"

The Nacolli grunted then asked, "And who owns this great treasure?"

"My brother's friend says the man is new to the city. He's never seen him but talk in the market is he's a Sabori trader. He bought the Trakin palace after old man Trakin died and his son sold the place to pay his gambling debts. Some say the son helped the old man on his way."

The Nacolli laughed knowingly and the small man joined him. The small man took a drink of his ale then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"If the trader can afford that place then he must have plenty of coin," said the Nacolli and the small man nodded vigorously.

"I know of the palace. It's in the Merchant Quarter. A good thief could relieve the Sabori of his treasure," the Nacolli said.

"He'll have to be better than you or me. The walls are fifteen feet high with guards inside and the patrols are thick in the Merchant's quarter," the small man said then shook his head. "I like my neck the length it is and not stretched by the hangman's noose."

The Nacolli nodded then took a long pull on his mug before refilling the mugs.

Dallamar had heard enough, he slipped from his table and walked quickly out the back door of the tavern. He had been waiting for a prize like this. This ruby, if it was the size the men said, would set his reputation.

The small man smiled as he watched Dallamar leave the tavern.

It was raining and the clouds hid the moon, which suited Dallamar for his night's business. He saw a whore huddled in a doorway. Little more than a girl, her thin dress was wet and clung to her

body.

"Looking for a night's pleasure?" the girl said. Her teeth chattered from the cold.

"Here, little sister," Dallamar said holding out a silver coin to the girl. "It's wet and business will be slow," he said. "Find a warm fire for the night."

The girl was surprised but snatched the coin and scurried away. Dallamar knew she would remember him if asked, remember she had seen a man of his description outside the Lion and Crown.

He hurried through the back alleys toward the Merchant's Quarter and found the Trakin palace. There he waited in the shadows and watched. He saw the wall as the men had said, at least fifteen feet high. A patrol came by, ten armed men carrying smoky torches. He hugged the wall out of sight until they passed. He had two notches on a time candle before the patrol came again. Plenty of time to do his business and be gone.

When the light of the torches faded, he ran across the street, then circled the compound avoiding the front gates. The wall was uniform in height but there was an alley between this palace and the next where he could scale it out of sight from the street. He checked the tools of his trade by touch in the darkness, thirty feet of thin horse hair rope, his folding grappling hook and his lock picks in their oiled leather case. With a dagger sheathed inside each of his soft-soled boots, he felt well prepared.

He uncoiled the rope then opened the grapple hook. After a couple of swings, the grapple sailed over the wall then fell on the other side, its leather padded tines silent on the stone. Dallamar pulled the rope tight, feeling the steel points catch, then tested the hold by hanging from the rope. Satisfied, he climbed up, hand over hand, until just his eyes were above the top of the wall. He saw a open space surrounding a sprawling two story stone building. The second floor was where the sleeping quarters would be. A wide balcony at the front of the building gave the location of the masters' rooms.

Dallamar ignored the rain soaking through his clothes as he listened for the guards. He heard a muffled curse off to his right and saw the dim form huddled in a small shelter inside the wall's front gates. The guard stamped his feet, cursing the rain again.

Dallamar saw another at the front doors to the palace and he knew one would be posted at the rear. Four was the usual complement of a household guard. Three outside and one inside the palace. The rain would keep the outside guards close in their shelters, not patrolling. Dallamar pulled himself up then laid along the top of the wall. In his black cloak, he was part of the shadows. He saw a small window on the side of the building on the second floor.

Reversing his grappling hook, he played out the line and lowered himself to the ground. There he crouched against the wall listening for any sound of alarm. There was none.

In a heavy downpour, he ran to the side of the palace under the small window. Again he stood still, listening. Satisfied he had been unseen, he turned to the wall, examining it closely. Running his fingers along the joints between the stones, he smiled. The joints were wide and the mortar had crumbled leaving places for hand and footholds.

He scaled the wall like a spider. With the fingers of one hand hooked on the window's stone sill, he pushed at the window. It was latched from the inside. He drew a dagger from one of his boot sheaths. Quiet work with its thin blade had the latch raised and the window opened in moments.

Dallamar slipped through the window, closing it behind him, but leaving it unlatched. He was in a small room that smelled of cedar. There were shelves lining the walls. In the darkness he felt among the shelves, finding bundles of blankets. He was in a bedding storage room. It was a room not likely to be locked.

Dallamar crept to the door and put his ear against it. He was cold and wet. Rain water dripped from his clothes and pooled around his feet as he listened. Hearing nothing, he tried the latch and the door unlocked. His heart started to pound. The inside guard would walk softly so as not to disturb his master. Dallamar opened the door, then put his ear to the crack and listened, but did not hear the guard's footfalls. He slipped through the door into the corridor. Bent low, hugging the walls, he moved quickly toward the front of the house.



Around a corner he saw a set of double doors half way down the corridor. He walked to the doors, raised the latch and entered the room beyond. He heard snoring coming from a canopied bed and saw a blanket-covered figure. Sitting on the stone pedestal in the center of the room was a carved wooden chest with an iron lock.

At the sight of the wooden chest, Dallamar started to think of what the ruby would mean. Logmar the Synthic trader would buy the jewel, no questions asked, although he would probably give no more than a quarter of what it was worth. Even a quarter would let him move on in style. He pushed the thoughts from his mind; the job was not done yet. He checked his pouch, making sure the square of black silk was there. He would leave the clothes in place of the ruby to tell all who had taken the treasure.

With one ear to the snoring figure on the bed, Dallamar walked to the pedestal and examined the lock on the chest. He took his lock picks from his pouch. Selecting one, he probed the lock. After a few moments he felt the mechanism yield to his efforts and heard a soft click. With both hands, he eased the lid up. Inside, nestled in a bed of white silk was the largest ruby he had ever seen. Even in the darkness, it seemed to glow with a dull red fire.

Dallamar smiled and reached into the chest. As his fingers wrapped around the stone, pain seared his hand and surged up his arm. Stifling a scream, he tried to pull his hand back, but he could not let go of the stone or pull free of the chest. The pain increased, spreading through his body, and he screamed. Falling to his knees beside the pedestal, he saw his fingers blacken then swell until the skin burst. Blood ran over the stone and the air was filled with the smell of rotting flesh.

The blackness spread rapidly up his arm like poison, his whole body burned with agony. Dallamar screamed again and again.

The doors to the sleeping chamber opened and Dallamar saw a man enter.

"Help me!" Dallamar cried. "The pain! It's killing me!"

It was difficult to focus his eyes and his mind worked slowly. Dallamar thought he recognized the man's clothes. Through the waves of pain, it came to him. He was the small man at the tavern. The one who had spoken of the ruby.

"You! Why?" Dallamar gasped through cracked and blackened lips. He saw the Nacolli get out of bed.

The small man walked to the pedestal and smiled.

"You hold the Eye of Karis, Dallamar," the man said. He saw surprise in the thief's tormented eyes.

"Yes, I know who you are and what you are. The ruby has the power to heal and prolong life, but first it must be charged. It absorbs the life force from one to give to another. But, you see, the stone must be touched willingly by someone who wants to possess it."

The light dimmed in Dallamar's eyes. His body was black and bloated. Before death ended his agony, he heard the man say, "I knew a thief who held himself in such high regard would not be able to resist the prize I dangled before him.

"Who will care when another thief disappears?"

THE UNFAILING SPELL

Sergel Strel'chenko

It was hardly pleasant in the vicinity of the Black Wood. The howling of the red-toothed monsters filled the air from morning till morning. After the poisonous rains the croaking of the giant frogs rattled windows. It was enough to wake the dead and drive the living into the grave.

However, Arh Eribal was not about to change his residence. His was the only inn on the road in the Black Wood, which provided him a goodly income from the seekers of wealth and adventure. He didn't fear the monsters of the Black Wood, although he'd never held a sword and was not very adept at magic. Nothing from the Black Wood could get through the invisible barrier that kept them from the rest of the world.

He didn't fear wandering knights. The owner of the inn was protected by a spell, which would reduce to ashes anyone who raised a weapon against him. The spell also worked in reverse, and Arh Eribal was prevented from using dagger and poison against his guests.

Not everyone returned from the Black Wood. Arh Eribal bore their deaths stoically. The innkeeper considered what they'd left behind in the inn as added payment, and this gave him some consolation.

A knock at the door and the barking of dogs in the courtyard woke Eribal from his midday nap. Reluctantly he rose from his bed, as narrow as a bench, and rushed to open the door. On the threshold stood a young fair-haired knight in shining armour sparkling with silver. He was not older than twenty-two.

In the view of the worldly-wise innkeeper, the knight was young and foolish and as a result recklessly daring. Arh Eribal thought that soon he would be the knight's heir.

The next morning the young knight, again attired in his shining armour, headed rapidly for the Black Wood. Arh Eribal was sure that he had seen him for the last time, and was already calculating what his silver goblets would bring him and wondering whether the knight's second horse tied outside would fetch a good price.

Yet that evening the knight knocked on the door again. Under his arm the knight carried the tooth of a red dragon. Arh Eribal knew that a dragon's tooth was worth a large diamond, and he very much hoped that the young knight would head into the woods at least one more time.

Days passed. Every morning the knight saddled his steed, always returning from the Black Wood with rich trophies. Arh Eribal had long since ceased rejoicing at the knight's constant victories and begun to lose patience....

In the end Arh Eribal decided to resort to sorcery. He'd recently bought a pretty strong spell from an acquaintance who was a famous sorcerer. If it were thrice recited in front of a sleeping person, that person on awakening would depart at once, never return and forget something very important.

Arh Eribal had already tested the spell. A rich-looking knight in golden armour had forgotten a purse emblazoned with his family's coat of arms. There were two very large coins inside, but they were only copper. One of them had been bent by his mighty fingers, and the other almost rubbed right through. Some magician from a far-off land had left behind an ancient book, yellowed by time, in an incomprehensible language. Eribal's successes were not great so far, but he hoped to make up for this.

One night Arh Eribal climbed to the knight's room, trying not to cause the old wooden steps to creak. The fair-haired lad was sleeping. Arh Eribal carefully approached him and thrice recited the spell aloud. The knight went on sleeping peacefully.

When he got back to his hard bed, Arh Eribal tossed and turned for a long time, dreamily musing on what that lucky young knight would consider very important. The collection of priceless dragon's teeth? The hide of the winged boar? The unicorn's horn? His sword made from excellent eastern steel? One of his beautiful horses?

On waking the following morning, he at once rushed upstairs to the knight's room. The bed covered with the old bear skin was deserted. The horses behind the window had disappeared.

"It worked!" exclaimed Arh Eribal, rubbing his hands. He searched the whole room. Groaning and moaning, he peeped into every chink, hoping that the knight had forgotten his heavy gold ring with its priceless stone.

The worldly-wise innkeeper never imagined that the young knight in the shining armour would consider it so important that he pay for his lengthy stay at the inn.

--SS

WHERE OLD DOGS DREAM

Joe Murphy

Rapal's moan fills the hut, pulling Askr from forgotten dreams. Eyes still closed, blood red against the darkness, he reaches for Vale's soft warmth, finding only cold furs. Askr stares at the empty side of his bed. His wife dwells no longer in Midgard. Age and sickness had taken their toll back when the leaves fell. Rolling over he sees the dogs. Rapal twitches, running through unknown places where only dogs may wander. The fire's embers cast meagre shadows on the black and brown of the war dog's fur, flickering ghosts on his white muzzle. Marta, younger by two seasons, sleeps motionless, white fur gleaming like the winter's drifts outside.

"I can't stand this anymore." Askr throws back the sleeping furs. Marta wakes instantly, jerking her smooth head upright, embers for eyes. Rapal takes longer, stretching, scratching a torn ear. Yet he too rises, shaking himself, the sound of summer thunder in the tiny hut. Rapal's eyes are twin rubies.

"That fool of a Jarl, Sigurd, leading the warriors to raid in this cold." Askr winces, joints crackling as feet find the floor. "The Skraelings will know, they'll slaughter our men as they did the other settlements."

Marta growls softly. Askr smiles. It sounds like her snores, he decides. But Rapal rises, moving to the door. The great shaggy war dog tugs the harness from a peg on the sod wall, dragging it to Askr's feet. Two pairs of glowing eyes gaze back, hoping.

"You still have the strength?" Askr rises, finds his breeches and woolen shirt, without looking away. "We'll seek Valhalla one last time?"

They howl, shrill yelps without echo, setting Askr's ears to throbbing, hackles rise. The sound ends only when he takes up the bearded silver war ax.

"To the sled." Askr shrugs into his chain mail, then dons a heavy fur cloak and leggings. Marta tugs the door open, Rapal drags the harness into the luminous snow.

"Why must my son dwell so far away? Normandy is the world's other side. He'll never voyage back to this new land, not for a hovel." Askr limps to the sled, hoping feeling will return to his right leg, leaving the hut open to the night.

Already Rapal stands before the sled, waiting for harness. Askr groans, bending for the cold leather. He didn't make the sled, but traded iron spear points to the brown skinned Skraelings near

Brattahlid further north. Sigurd and the younger men laughed, saying it was too fragile, yet their smiles faded once they saw its speed.

"Hold, girl," he growls at Marta, bounding about underfoot, whining to be gone. Rapal pulls the sled alone, Marta guards their backs. Askr's fingers ache, burn from the cold, fumble with the knots until he's satisfied.

"Jah!" he shouts. "Jah Rapal, find the warriors!" Rapal surges, shoulders hunched, breath steaming like a dragon's. Askr holds fast to the sled, bending knees to take the shocks. He kicks back into the snow, aiding the old dog while the ax bounces against his shoulder. Darkness rules this land, even the moon fears the cold, Askr's nose and throat burn from it.

"Jah Marta, Jah Rapal!" His friends need no urging. Snow laden spruce guard the path. Marta finds the warriors' trail, yelps, dancing over the drifts. Rapal follows, slowing for a turn through the forest, he finds their scent and gives chase. Only a few tracks, Askr realizes, they've taken a boat as well. He feels the dog's urgency, fights the cold off with memories. Vale dwells in Hel now, for he has yet to find a warrior's honor. This troubles him; one day at the end perhaps he would ask the One-Nyed God why.

Flames flicker up from the Skraeling huts, war cries echo and fade, swallowed up by the night. Rapal gallops, hind feet kicking snow into Askr's face, it freezes into his beard. Dark bulky shapes huddle in the village's center, surrounded by twice their number. The Skraelings fight without honor, refusing to close with Sigurd's men, they circle in shadows, arrow shafts glinting white from the fires. A dozen Norsemen lay scattered in the snow.

"There!" Askr points to the beached longboat. "The Skraelings gather, keeping our own men from their way home. Jah Marta, Jah Rapal." Red eyes meet his, they understand. Rapal races down the snowy rise, straight and true to the mark. Marta lopes at Rapal's side, eager, tongue lolling out as if she can taste blood already.

"Odin aid me!" Askr slips the ax from his shoulder. He ties its thong around his waist, knotting the ends to the sled. "Jaaaaahh!" They burst from the trees, skimming by his people, rushing as wind towards the longboat. Sigurd sees him, jaw dropping.

"It's old Askr. Hurry, they've blocked our way!" Sigurd cries to the others. The warriors charge, realizing the Skraelings' trap before their enemy can reach the longboat. Askr leads now, spinning ghost ax cleaving the Skraelings. Marta's jaws close on reddish brown skin, dragging a screaming fighter near enough for Askr to use his ax. Rapal's howlings are spears of sound, frightening all before him.

Askr's brethren fall upon the Skraelings. In such close melees they have no equal. Skraelings die. Children of the Aesir leave no other choice. Rapal circles, Askr reaps the cowards, until he can find no more.

"I've never seen such a fight from one so long of tooth." Sigurd strides to him, clearing steaming clouds of Rapal's breath with sword. "I've judged you wrongly, Askr."

"It's not your only mistake." Askr steps from his sled, patting Marta dancing at his side. "These people wished for peace. You should've brought them gifts for they know Meadow Land like we do not. They might have shared their knowledge."

Many nod, hearing his words. Sigurd looks down at fur booted feet. "It was ill thought, I admit. A new land calls for new ways. Come, bring your sled aboard the boat. From now on we'll all listen to Askr the Old."

"Why do you only listen for such brief moments?" Askr begins, but Rapal and Marta howl. He turns to the war dogs, follows their gaze to the north sky. "Rainbow Bridge." He lifts his ax, saluting

the path from Midgard to Asgard which shimmers and curls, many colors hiding the stars.

"Odin himself watches this night." Sigurd spreads his hands. "Waiting for our brothers to join him."

"Perhaps he'll wait for me as well." Askr refastens his ax. "A long life has given me more questions than answers. I must speak to him."

"Wait!" Sigurd calls.

"Jah Marta, Jah Rapal." Anger lashes through Askr's voice. His heart thrills with the dogs' cries. Such a sign is meant for me alone, he knows. Ignoring the warriors, Askr turns his sled to the north, toward the beginning of Rainbow Bridge. Again his war dogs howl, rejoicing at his choice.

"There be no path to Odin's Bridge," Askr whispers when the sled slows. So long a journey must be tiring the dogs. But Rapal grins a war dog's grin, nodding, hunching huge shoulders. He gallops through drifts of white jewels, breath hissing over the whisper of wood on ice, surging on. Trees close overhead, hiding stars and dancing glories of the path to Asgard.

Marta bounds beside them, halting suddenly, hackles ragged with ice. The white dog snarls with a sound even the darkness might fear.

"What is it? What can you smell, girl?" Askr asks as Rapal slows to a halt. Marta Red Eyes looks at him, licking frost from her muzzle. The forest speaks for her, the long low moan of the great wolves cresting through the trees like surf upon stone.

"Do they hunt?"

Both dogs nod, sides shaking, icy flecks dropping from their fur. Askr bites his lips, the time for shouting and wrath now over. "Wolves will drag us down, nothing in nature is more dangerous. Jah, Jah," he whispers.

The sled bursts from the trees into a wide clear valley. Beyond, on the other side of a great hill, Rainbow Bridge dances. Wolves leap from the shadows, voices joined in hunter's song.

"The long night of waiting is over!" they cry. "We've found our prey!" Marta whines, moving back behind Askr.

"You hate the ones most like you?" Askr winces, neck crackling when he turns to the dog. "You're the stronger. Do you fear these brothers or is it something else?"

Marta's breath adorns her muzzle in frozen silver. Her eyes seem darker now, no longer filled with fire. A shrill growl fills the air, wolves leap, ax swings. A big male lunges into Rapal's harness. Leather twists in snapping teeth. Rapal almost somersaults in eager lust, ax-sized jaws close on wolf snout.

Askr tumbles into the snow, cold fire burning face and neck. Ax sings with his comrades. Two females land upon Marta. She screams in their jaws, twisting back, angry fangs close upon wolf foot.

"Nooo!" Askr cries. Ax freezes in his hands, he throws himself forward, silver cleaves fur, finds blood. Wolf dies. The sled twists, flipping over with Rapal's charge. He tumbles into the other, jaws closing on its snout, forcing Marta's release. Wolves spring back, finding shadows.

"No, girl, no." Askr falls to Marta's side, hot steam seeping from her shoulder and flank with crimson haze, leaving the taste of iron cold in Askr's mouth. Rapal roars out his challenge, snow dropping loose in the trees from the sound.

"We must get her away from them." Askr lifts the slack form. Marta pants, eyes unseeing, tongue slack. Askr brings her to the sled, kicking it upright. He lays her in its sling so she might see their way. In the few heartbeats it takes for him to untangle Rapal's harness, the wolves sound again, promising vengeance for their fallen.

"Jah Rapal!" Askr hisses, pointing towards the bridge. Rapal jerks the harness tight, turning from the valley into the trees towards the crest of a steep hill. Low branches behind them throw off snow from the wolves' passing.

"I'm sorry, girl, so very sorry I couldn't keep them from you." Askr crouches on the sled, one hand seeking warmth in Marta's fur. Her head lifts, dark eyes turn, begging. Askr straightens, knowing her look. "How many times have I seen such a gaze? How many warriors have sought what she seeks?" he whispers.

The wolf cries rise with the hill's crest. Rapal skids to a halt, path blocked by night. Askr strides from the sled, looks down from the height. The hill side ends with a jagged cliff, much too steep to descend. Growls surround, stream from the shadows. Musky scent of blood and death fills his nose. Boldly the wolves march, stepping out to face him, ringing the cliff. Alone the largest approaches, slowly circling. Rapal's legs spread, his claws dig into the ice preparing to spring.

Marta rises from the sled, whimpering she curls, facing Big Wolf. Askr moves to her side, ax half raised. He lifts the weapon, handle slick with frozen sweat, feels Marta's hesitant paw at his leg.

"I understand, girl." Tears fill his eyes, he wants the wolf himself now, remembering Marta's joyous bounds. But her lost look refuses to fade from his mind. When the wolf comes between cliff and sled, Askr drops his ax, with cunning slowness he lifts Marta, feels her tongue on his cheek. A single moment, he finds her gaze, again the eyes glow red.

"Take that cur to Valhalla!" he shouts, flinging Marta at the beast. Marta screams in midair, slamming into Big Wolf, they topple over, wolf claws slicing the ice. Blinking back tears, Askr reaches ax, ready for the onslaught. "Won't you grant me the same grace?" Rapal howls in triumph, for the wolves slink away, wanting easier prey.

Rainbow Bridge burns! Stars feed its writhing frenzy until the whole sky glows crimson. Standing upon the edge of the abyss, Askr looks down at motionless bodies half buried in diamonds. Marta's white jaws are locked forever upon shaggy throat. Her eyes are dark, pits without reflection, empty.

Askr howls with Rapal. "I still don't know." He shudders, refusing to weep. "I could only give what she asked, a warrior's death." Rapal moans softly, nodding his great head. The war dog rears up, pulling harness taut.

"We must go on." Askr knows what those red eyes want. "Find the bridge before dawn."

He trudges to the sled, planting his feet on the skis. "A quick honorable death, is it the better way? Jah Rapal!" Rapal jumps forward, tearing through the snow as if treading wolf flesh. Rainbow Bridge dances, flickering through the trees before them, with only the silent hissing of the sled.

They move through night unending, cold cutting Askr's face and hands, winter's jaws. His eyes flutter, bouncing open whenever the sled finds a hidden bump. The whisper of wooden ski upon snow deepens, the sled slows. Askr looks up, mind jerked from dream's edge.

"Who invades the night, seeking the path to Asgard?" The voice is the sound of tumbling boulders. At first Askr sees nothing. Then a shape forms, part of a tree's outline against the sky, half of a snowy bush, limbs weighted down, stars for eyes. Rapal growls, hackles rising, streaming breath finds the form of a frost giant.

"I'm Askr Greyhair. Here to cross the bridge. I've questions for Odin One Eye."

"The bridge isn't for mortals, if man ye be. Go back coward, find the warrior's path to Valhalla or hide in your dreams." The frost giant's form hardens, blue-green skin shining like river ice in the sun, crystalline breastplate reflecting the bridge's flickering wonder. It holds a tree trunk club, knotted

branches forming spikes.

"It's my path tonight. Who bars my way, keeping me from destiny's end?" Askr tries to still the tremble in his voice. Hands moisten, freezing to the shaft of his ax. The giant's eyes meet his, it smiles with icicle teeth, seeing his fear.

"Go back to your hearth, little man thing. Gormschild holds this place from all."

Rapal roars! Jaws flare, haunches spring, the great war dog flies into Gormschild. Askr falls from the sled, floundering in deep snow. Rapal's jaws find the giant's shoulder. Dog teeth snap and break against armor.

"No beast is my match, no mortal my conqueror." Gormschild pries Rapal from its shoulder, flinging him into an ice hard tree trunk. Askr hears his comrade howl, feels the dog's agony. Lunging up, his silvered ax meets the giant's club. Iron and ice clang and clamor, nine blows then twenty before Gormschild's club shatters. Rapal lunges from behind, limping right forepaw drawn close to chest. Jaws find Gormschild, seize his leg. Askr springs forth, but Gormschild flings the stubby club's end. It strikes Askr over his heart, driving the breath from his lungs in gasping moan.

Askr falls on bending knees, sees the giant topple back onto Rapal. Desperate to help his comrade, silvered ax flies from his fingers. Gormschild's breastplate shatters, ringing out with a thousand golden bells. The frost giant pitches forward onto the ax, darkness swirls through Askr's eyes.

Rapal's tongue scrapes across his whiskers, gentle teeth nip and tug. Askr moans, pushing the dog back, sitting up.

"Have we really bested Gormschild, old friend? Can a mortal triumph over those who aren't?" His legs are stiff, knees of glass cut into muscles. The frost giant's body is gone, tree branches naked of snow form dark runes where it once laid. Askr finds his ax, silver blade buried, caught hard in snow's crust. Rapal limps at his side, ice rimed fur never quite moving away from his thigh. Askr bends, runs his fingers along the war dog, forcing ice crystals from the curls.

"We can't stay here." Rapal's eyes pulse and smoulder. "Dawn comes soon, on to the bridge."

"I'm tired," Askr tells him. "Want to sleep." His chest aches with every breath, a hard shaft of cold frozen to his lungs. But Rapal's broken teeth close gently on his hand. The war dog tugs, tail lashing. Askr looks up, in the direction of Rapal's struggles.

"The Bridge! We've reached Rainbow Bridge with none to stand before us, none to bar our way."

Rapal's barks echo over the night sky, ringing back from frozen glades. Rainbow Bridge towers above them, base a glowing mass of endlessly churning colors. To Askr's fur clad boot, it feels like the snow still, crunching with his weight. Rapal's jaws hold his sleeve, pulling, urging. They walk up into the night sky, rainbow colors sizzle and hiss, buoying them up through the darkness.

The Reader's Choice

Readers of #9 chose:

The Burgomaster's Road by Richard Cumyn

as the best of that issue.

Readers are invited to write the editorial address (see last page) and cast their ballot.

The winner will be announced in the following issue.

"Why is this path the longest of all?" Cold seeps into Askr, hands and feet becoming only stumps, yet they bear him on. His breath clings to beard and skin, wind whips up, blowing stars like snowflakes against his brow, how they burn with frigid flame. Askr looks down upon the luminous gleam of snow covered Meadow Land, seeing only a few bright spots of fire where men still dwell. Rapal moans softly.

"Do you remember the hearths, merry with children's song, old friend? Can you still taste the spring grasses and hear Vale's laughter on the green wind? Does Marta call you from Valhalla?" Askr lets his feet fall silent. Rapal is gone. Confused he turns, sees the war dog lying across the bridge's swirling mist. The dog is weary, he realizes, too old to travel so far and hard. Rapal's eyes are dim, no longer full of fire, simple mirrors reflecting bridge, sky, and stars, a universe existing alone within his bony skull. It is a place where old dogs dream and run forever.

"We've come so far." Askr bends, his strength flows out with the cold, but Rapal is warm and solid in his arms. Askr turns, sees the first glowing ribbon of dawn on the far side of the world. Rapal's panting sides keep time to his heart, each beat means another step.

Winter winds suck the warmth up, seeming to buffet from all sides. Askr can no longer feel his arms, his legs still move but of their own will. He wants to weep, having come so close, he despairs of reaching the hall of the gods. Rapal's tongue crosses cheek, urging him on.

"I would have torn the answers from Odin's throat," he whispers into Rapal's ear. "And demanded of him why love leaves us for death. I'd have sought to discover why he gives us no sword to hold it back. A single day in eternity is all we're given, and part of a night. What do we accomplish in such a short time, and what does it mean to those who live forever?"

Rapal's eyes close, chest falls motionless. The warmth is suddenly gone from the war dog's body. Askr holds tight, tears melt the stars before him, shimmering into a new shape. There in the first faint light, a castle stands, monstrous in size, a thousand rooms.

Askr limps, his head bends, burying his face in Rapal's cold curls. Grief spasms, but when he looks up, his arms are empty. He stands alone. The castle looms closer, glittering quicksilver walls opaque, still in dawn's darkness. Figures stand before the castle, a hand lifts, pushing back a grey wide brimmed hat, revealing a single ember eye.

"Welcome Askr the Wise! Welcome to Valhalla!" Odin himself strides to meet him. Yet before the god, others run. A Valkyrie, armoured in gold and light, arms stretched wide. Askr sees

her face, young once more, freckles and tears dusting her smile. His steps quicken, voice choking in his throat, he runs to meet his Vale. Two young pups bound at her side, one white with the blinding radiance of mid afternoon snow. The other black and brown, fur in tight curls, yelping a war dog's welcome. Askr reaches out, gathering all into his arms. Pain flees his body at their touch. Vale's hair smells of wild grape. Rapal's ear is untom silk in his fingers, Marta's joy fills his ears. Askr enters Valhalla without ever letting go of his loves--all questions forgotten.

--JM

Runic Bards

Mark C. Alldis is a new writer of fantasy, horror and science-fiction living in Stoney Creek, Ontario. His work has been accepted in *Tickled by Thunder* and the anthology *Your Baggage is in Buffalo*.

Corey Brand, who has lived in Jefferson City, Missouri for most of his life, writes because he has to, enjoys creativity and is working on a fantasy novel. He married his Ukrainian pen pal Olga.

Peggy Hamilton has studied engineering, geology, archaeology, computer science, statistics, history, and English. She currently teaches English, science, and math in California.

Joe Murphy of Fairbanks, Alaska has worked as a refiner operator and special education teacher and recently had several sales to the small press. He lives with his wife, Veleta, and their two cats and two dogs, Lovecraft and Dickens.

Owen Nell is a story teller and poet from British Columbia.

Mai Nguyen is an Ottawa artist.

D. Sandy Nielsen is a member of the Brampton Writers' Guild and Visual Arts Brampton. He has had at least three shows of his paintings, most of which deal with Viking-related themes. He belongs to Who-Dun-Its, a group for mystery lovers. He has two cats named Thor and Loki.

Mark Noe is a writer from Arlington, Texas.

Greg Older lives in Ottawa. His story was written for Trent University's Cultural Studies Program. He does write real SF and fantasy, and would have a novel out by now if reality wasn't making so many demands on him.

Owen Oulton, a frequent contributor to Bardic Runes, is an artist living in Ottawa.

Tom Pilkus lives in Urbana, Illinois where he slowly writes stories which strike him as humorous.

Sergel Strel'chenko is a leading SF and fantasy writer in Volgograd, Russia.

Judith L. Tucker is a writer from Salem, Oregon.

Gerald Upton was born in Quebec about 45 years ago, has lived in Montreal, Ottawa, and now the Toronto area, has been writing for 30 years, is a member of the Canadian Authors' Association and Mensa, and is a great aficionado of classical music.